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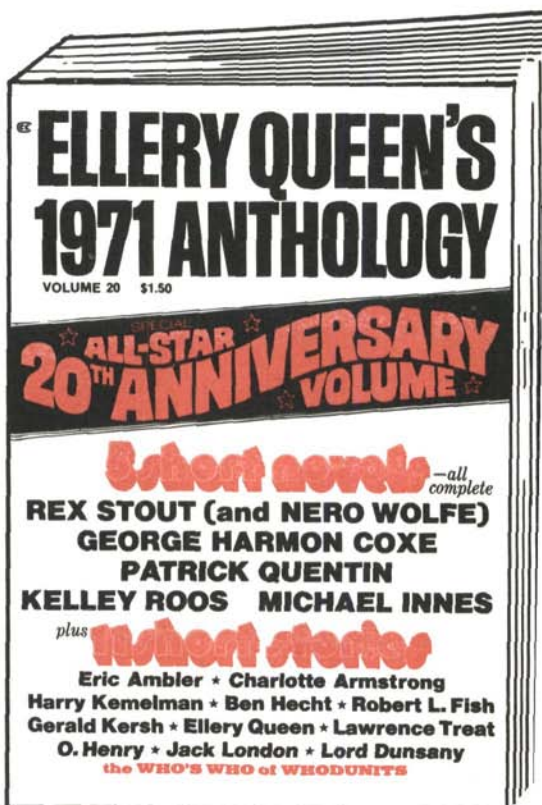
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ELLERY QUEEN'S *Mystery Magazine*

ALL-AMERICAN ISSUE

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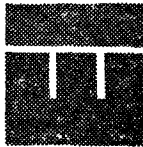
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the **NEWEST** crime story by

STANLEY ELLIN

One of the Mystery Events of the Year—the annual new short story that Stanley Ellin writes especially for Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine ... a tale of the art world of Butte-Montmartre—of the shabby, unkempt painter O'Toole, of the velvet-eyed and vengeful model known as Fatima, of the sadistic and abominable art dealer Madame Lagrue, with her unique method of buying bad art ... a wittily Gallic tale of the stuff of folklore ...

And now—à vous la balle ...

KINDLY DIG YOUR GRAVE

by *STANLEY ELLIN*

THE STORY OF MADAME LAGRUE, the most infamously successful dealer in bad art on Butte-Montmartre, and of O'Toole, the undernourished painter, and of Fatima, the vengeful model who loved O'Toole, and of what happened to them, properly begins in Madame Lagrue's gallery on rue Hyacinthe.

It is possible that the worst art in the whole world was displayed on the walls of the Galerie Lagrue.

Madame, of course, did not know this, nor, one must surmise, did her customers. To Madame, every picture on her walls from

the leaden landscapes to the tropical moonlights painted on black velvet, from the cunning kittens peeping out of boots to the endless array of circus clowns, some with teardrops conspicuously gleaming on their cheeks to indicate the breaking hearts beneath the painted smiles—every one of these was beautiful.

That was the first reason for her fantastic success as a dealer in low-priced art—her abominable taste.

The second reason was that long before any of her competitors, Madame Lagrue had smelled out the renaissance in

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faraway America. After the war, all over that golden land, it seemed, the middle-aged middle class had developed a furious appetite for, as Madame's brochure so neatly described it, *genuine works of art, hand-painted on high quality canvas by great French artists for reasonable prices.*

So, when the trickle of American interior decorators and department-store buyers became a tide regularly lapping at the summit of Butte-Montmartre, Madame was ready for it. Before her competitors around the Place du Tertre in the shadow of Sacre-Coeur knew what was happening, she had cornered the fattest part of the market, and where others occasionally sold a picture to a passing tourist, she sold pictures by the dozen and by the gross to a wholesale clientele.

Then, having created a sellers' market among those who produced the kittens and clowns, Madame saw to it that she was not made the victim of any economic law dictating that she pay higher prices for this merchandise.

Here, her true talent as an art dealer emerged most brilliantly.

Most of the artists she dealt with were a shabby, spiritless lot of hacks, and, as Madame contentedly observed, their only pressing need was for a little cash in hand every day. Not enough to corrupt them, of course, but barely enough for rent, food, and

drink and the materials necessary for creating their pictures.

So where Madame's competitors, lacking her wealth, offered only dreams of glory—they would price your picture at 100 francs and give you half of that if it sold—Madame offered the reality of 20 or 30 francs cash in hand. Or, perhaps, only ten francs. But it was cash paid on the spot, and it readily bought her first claim on the services of the painters who supplied her stock in trade.

The danger was that since Madame needed the painters as much as the painters needed Madame, it put them in a good bargaining position. It was to solve this problem that she invented a method of dealing with her stable which would have made Torquemada shake his head in admiration.

The painter, work in hand, was required to present himself at her office, a dank and frigid cubbyhole behind the showroom with barely enough room in it for an ancient rolltop desk and swivel chair and an easel on which the painting was placed for Madame's inspection. Madame, hat firmly planted on her head as if to assert her femininity—the hat was like a large black flowerpot worn upside down with a spray of dusty flowers projecting from its crown—would sit like an empress in the swivel chair and study the painting with an expression of

distaste, her eyes narrowing and lips compressing as she examined its details. Then on a piece of scrap paper, carefully shielding the paper with her other hand to conceal it, she would jot down a figure.

That was the price the artist had to meet. If he asked a single franc more than the figure on that scrap of paper, he would be turned away on the spot. There was no second chance offered, no opportunity to bargain. He might have started out from his hutch on rue Norvins confident that the property under his arm was worth at least 50 francs this time. Before he was halfway to rue Hyacinthe, the confidence would have dwindled, the asking price fallen to 40 francs or even 30 as the image of Madame Lagrue's craggy features rose before him. By the time he had propped his picture on the easel he was willing to settle for 20 and praying that the figure she was mysteriously noting on her scrap paper wasn't ten.

"*A vous la balle,*" Madame would say, meaning it was his turn to get into the game. "How much?"

Thirty, the painter would think desperately. Every leaf on those trees is painted to perfection. You can almost hear the water of that brook gurgling. This one is worth at least 30. But that sour look on the old miser's face. Maybe she's in no mood for brooks and

trees this morning—

"Twenty?" he would say faintly, the sweat cold on his brow.

Madame would hold up the scrap of paper before him to read for himself, and whatever he read there would fill him with helpless rage. If he had asked too little, he could only curse his lack of courage. If too much, it meant no sale, and there was no use raising a hubbub about it. Madame did not tolerate hubbubs, and since she had the massive frame and short temper of a Norman farmhand, one respected her sensibilities in such matters.

No, all one could do was take a rejected picture to Florelle, the dealer down the block, and offer it to him for sale at commission, which meant waiting a long time or forever for any return on it. Or, if Madame bought the picture, take the pittance she offered and head directly to the Café Hyacinthe next door for a few quick ones calculated to settle the nerves. Next to Madame Lagrue herself, it was the Café Hyacinthe that profited most from her method of dealing with her painters.

A vous la balle. It was a bitter jest among the painters in Madame's stable, a greeting they sometimes used acidly on one another, the croaking of a bird of ill omen which nightmarishly entered their dreams and could

only be muted by the happy thought of some day landing a fist on Madame's bulbous nose.

Of them all, the one who was worst treated by Madame and yet seemed to suffer least under her oppression was O'Toole, the American painter who had drifted to Butte-Montmartre long ago in pursuit of his art. He was at least as shabby and unkempt and undernourished as the others, but he lived with a perpetual, gentle smile of intoxication on his lips, sustained by his love of painting and by the cheapest *marc* the Café Hyacinthe could provide.

Marc is distilled from the grape pulp left in the barrel after the wine is pressed, and when the wine happens to be a Romanée-Conti of a good year its *marc* makes an excellent drink. The Café Hyacinthe's *marc*, on the other hand, was carelessly, sometimes surreptitiously, distilled from the pulp of unripe grapes going to make the cheapest *vin du pays*, and it had the taste and impact of grape-flavored gasoline.

As far as anyone could tell, it provided all the sustenance O'Toole required, all the vision he needed to paint an endless succession of pastoral scenes in the mode of the Barbizon School. The ingredients of each scene were the same—a pond, a flowery glen, a small stand of birch trees; but O'Toole varied their arrangement, sometimes putting the trees on one

side of the pond, sometimes on the other. The warmth of a bottle of *marc* in his belly, the feel of the brush in his hand, this was all the bliss O'Toole asked for.

He had had a hard time of it before entering Madame's stable. During the tourist season each year he had worked at a stand near the Place du Tertre doing quick portraits in charcoal—*Likeness Guaranteed Or Your Money Back*; but business was never good since, although the likenesses were indisputable, naive and kindly mirror images, the portraits were wholly uninspired. His heart just wasn't in them. Trees and flowery glens and ponds, that was where his heart lay. The discovery that Madame Lagrue was willing to put money in his hand for them was the great discovery of his life. He was her happiest discovery, too. Those pastorals, she soon learned, were much in demand by the Americans. They sold as fast as she could put them on display.

O'Toole was early broken in to Madame's method of doing business. That first terrible experience when he was taught there was no retreat from his overestimate of a picture's value, no chance to quote a second price, so that he had to trudge away, pastoral under his arm unsold, had been enough to break his spirit completely. After that, all

he asked was 20 francs for a large picture and ten for a small one and so established almost a happy relationship with Madame.

The one break in the relationship had been when Florelle, who owned the shop on the other side of the Café Hyacinthe and who was not a bad sort for an art dealer, had finally persuaded him to hand over one of his paintings for sale at commission. The next time O'Toole went to do business with Madame Lagrue he was dismayed to find her regarding him with outright loathing.

"No sale," she said shortly. "No business. I'm not interested."

O'Toole foggily stared at his picture on the easel, trying to understand what was wrong with it.

"But it's beautiful," he said. "Look at it. Look at those flowers. It took me three days just to do those flowers."

"You're breaking my heart," said Madame. "Ingrate. Traitor. You have another dealer now. Let him buy your obscene flowers."

In the end, O'Toole had to reclaim his picture from Florelle and beg Madame's forgiveness, almost with tears in his eyes. And Madame, contemplating the flow of landscapes which would be coming her way until O'Toole drank himself to death, almost had tears of emotion in her own eyes. The landscapes were bringing her at least 100 francs

each, and the thought of 500 to 1000 percent profit on a picture can make any art dealer emotional.

Then Fatima entered the scene.

Fatima was not her name, of course; it was what some wag at the Café Hyacinthe had christened her when she had started to hang around there between sessions of modeling for life classes. She was a small swarthy Algerian, very plain of feature, but with magnificent, dark, velvety eyes, coal-black hair which hung in a tangle to her waist, and a lush figure. She was also known to have the worst disposition of anyone who frequented the café and, with a few drinks in her, the foulest mouth.

"She's not even eighteen yet," the bartender once observed, listening awestruck as she told off a hapless painter who had sat down uninvited at her table. "Think how she'll sound when she's a full-grown woman!"

She also had her sentimental side, blubbering unashamedly at sad scenes in the movies, especially those in which lovers were parted or children abused, and had a way of carting stray kittens back to her room on the rue des Saulles until her concierge, no sentimentalist at all, raised a howl about it.

So although it was unexpected, it was not totally mystifying to the patrons of the Café Hyacinthe

that Fatima should suddenly demonstrate an interest in O'Toole one rainy day when he stumbled into the café and stood in the doorway dripping cold rainwater on the floor, sneezing his head off, and, no question about it, looking even more forlorn than any of the stray kittens Fatima's concierge objected to.

Fatima was alone at her usual table, sullenly nursing her second Pernod. Her eyes fell on O'Toole, taking him in from head to foot, and a light of interest dawned in them. She crooked a finger.

"Hey, you. Come over here."

It was the first time she had ever invited anyone to her table. O'Toole glanced over his shoulder to see whom she was delivering the invitation to and then pointed to himself.

"Me?"

"Yes, you, stupid. Come here and sit down."

He did. And it was Fatima who not only stood him a bottle of wine but ordered a towel from the bartender so that she could dry his sodden hair. The patrons at the other tables gaped as she toweled away, O'Toole's head bobbing back and forth helplessly under her ministrations.

"You're a real case, aren't you?" she told O'Toole. "Don't you have brains enough to wear a hat in the rain so you don't go around trying to kill yourself in this stinking weather?"

"A hat?" O'Toole said vaguely.

"Yes, imbecile. That thing one uses to keep his head dry in the rain."

"Oh," said O'Toole. Then he said in timid apology, "I don't have one."

Everyone in the café watched with stupefaction as Fatima tenderly patted his cheek.

"It's all right, baby," she said.

"Someone left one in my room last week. When we get out of here you'll walk me back there and I'll give it to you."

The whole thing came about as abruptly as that. And it was soon clear to the most cynical beholder that Fatima had fallen hopelessly in love with this particular stray cat. She began to bathe regularly, she combed out the tangles in her splendid hair, she showed up at the café wearing dresses recently laundered. And, surest sign of all, the little red welts and the bite marks once bestowed on her neck and shoulders by various overnight acquaintances all faded away.

As for O'Toole, Fatima mothered him passionately. She moved him into her room, lock, stock, and easel; saw to it that he was decently fed and clothed; threatened to slit the throat of the bartender of the Café Hyacinthe if he dared serve her man any more of that poisonous *marc* instead of a drinkable wine; and promised to gut anyone in the

café who made the slightest remark about her *grand amour*.

No one there or elsewhere on Butte-Montmartre made any remarks. In fact, with only one exception among them, they found the situation rather touching. The one exception was Madame Lagrue.

It was not merely that paintings of nudes outraged Madame—in her loudly expressed opinion, the Louvre itself would do well to burn its filthy exhibitions of nakedness—but the knowledge that the degraded models for such paintings should be allowed to walk the very streets she walked was enough to turn her stomach. And that one of these degraded, venal types should somehow take possession of a cherished property like O'Toole—!

Madame recognized that the corruption had set in the day O'Toole appeared before her almost unrecognizably dandified. The shabby old suit was the same, but it had been cleaned and patched. The shoes were still scuffed and torn, but the knotted pieces of string in them had been replaced by shoelaces. The cheeks were shaven for the first time in memory, and, to Madame's narrowed eyes, they did not appear quite so hollow as they used to be. All in all, here was the sad spectacle of a once dedicated artist being prettified and fattened up like a shoat for the market,

and, no doubt, having the position of avarice injected into him by the slut who was doing all this prettifying and fattening. It was easy to visualize the way Fatima must be demanding of him that he ask some preposterous price for this landscape on the easel. Well, Madame grimly decided, if a showdown had to come, it might as well come right now.

Madame glanced at the landscape and at O'Toole who stood there beaming with admiration at it, then wrote down on her scrap of paper the usual price of 20 francs.

"Come on," she said tartly, "*à vous la balle*. Name your price. I'm a busy woman. I don't have all day for this nonsense."

O'Toole stopped beaming. Just before departing for the gallery he had been admonished by Fatima to demand 100 francs for this painting.

"Simpleton," she had said kindly, "you've put a week's work into this thing. Florelle told me a painting like this was worth at least a hundred francs to the old witch. You have to stop letting her bleed you to death. This time if she offers only twenty or thirty, just spit in her ugly face."

"Yes, this time," O'Toole had said bravely.

Now, with Madame's flinty eyes on him, he smiled not so bravely. He opened his mouth to speak, closed it, opened it again.

"Well?" said Madame in a voice of doom.

"Would twenty francs be all right?" said O'Toole.

"Yes," said Madame triumphantly.

It was the first of her many triumphs over Fatima's baleful influence. The greatest triumph, one Madame herself never even knew of, came the time Fatima announced to O'Toole that she would accompany him on his next sales meeting. If he didn't have the guts of a decayed flounder in dealing with his exploiter, at least she, thank God, did. She watched as O'Toole, after giving her a long troubled look, started to pack his paints together.

"What are you doing, numskull?" she demanded.

"I'm leaving," O'Toole said with a dignity that astonished and alarmed her. "This is no good. A woman shouldn't mix in her husband's business."

"What husband? We're not married, imbecile."

"We're not?"

"No, we're not."

"I'm leaving anyhow," said O'Toole, somewhat confusingly. "I don't want anyone to help me sell my paintings."

It took Fatima a flood of tears and two bottles of *vin rouge* to wheedle him out of his decision, and she never made the same mistake again. It was a lost cause, she saw. All O'Toole wanted

besides the pleasure of painting was the pleasure of having a ready cash market for his paintings, and Madame Lagrue, by offering him one, had bought his soul like the devil.

Until she had to face this realization Fatima had merely detested Madame Lagrue. Now she hated her with a devouring hatred. Oh, to have revenge on the evil old woman, some lovely revenge that would make her scream her head off. Many a night after that Fatima happily put herself to sleep with thoughts of revenge circling through her head, most of them having to do with hot irons. And would wake in the morning knowing despondently how futile those happy thoughts were.

Then Nature decided to play a card.

O'Toole was, as is so often the case, one of the last to learn the news. He received it with honest bewilderment.

"You're going to have a baby?" he said, trying to understand this.

"We are going to have a baby," Fatima corrected. "Both of us. It's already on the way. Is that clear?"

"Yes, of course," said O'Toole with becoming sobriety. "A baby."

"That's right. And it means some big changes around here. For one thing, it means we really are getting married now, because

my kid's not going to be any miserable, fatherless alley rat. It's going to have a nice little mama and papa, and a nice little house to grow up in. You're not already married, are you?"

"No."

"Well, I'll take my chances on that. And for another thing, we're getting out of Paris. I've had my bellyful of this horrible place, and so have you. We're packing up and going to my home town in Algeria. To Bougie where the kid will get some sunshine. My aunt and uncle own a café there, a nice little place, and they've got no kids of their own, so they'd give anything to have me help them run the joint. You can paint meanwhile."

"A baby," said O'Toole. To Fatima's immense relief he seemed to be rather pleased with the idea. Then his face darkened. "Bougie," he said. "But how will I sell my paintings?"

"You can ship them to your old witch. You think she'll turn down such bargains because they come in the mail?"

O'Toole considered this unhappily. "I'll have to talk to her about it."

"No, I will, whether you like it or not," said Fatima, risking everything on this throw of the dice. "I've got another piece of business to settle with her anyhow."

"What business?"

"Money. We'll need plenty of it to get to Bougie and set up in a house there. And it wouldn't hurt to have a few francs extra put away for the bad times so the kid can always have a pair of shoes when he needs them."

"He?"

"Or she. It's even more expensive with a girl, if it comes to that. Or would you rather have your daughter selling her innocent little body as soon as she's able to walk?"

O'Toole shook his head vigorously at the suggestion. Then he looked wonderingly at the mother-to-be.

"But this money—" he said. "You think Madame Lagrue will give it to us?"

"Yes."

Finally, he had found something on which he could express a firm opinion. "You're crazy," he said.

"Am I?" Fatima retorted.

"Well, simpleton, you leave it to me and I'll show you how crazy I am. And get this straight. If you don't let me handle that miserable old hyena my own way, I'll turn you over to the cops for giving me a baby without marrying me, and they'll throw you in jail for twenty years. Nobody does any painting in jail either. He just sits there and rots until he's an old man. Do you understand?"

For the first time O'Toole

found himself face to face with a presence even more overwhelming than Madame Lagrue's.

"Yes," he said.

"All right then," said Fatima. "Now get a nice big canvas ready. You're going to paint me a picture."

So it was that a week later, Fatima appeared in the Galerie Lagrue bearing a large painting clumsily wrapped in newspaper. Madame's assistant, a pale, timid girl, tried to bar her from the office and was shoved aside.

Madame was at her desk in the office. At the sight of her visitor who came bearing what must be an original O'Toole, she quivered with indignation. She aimed a commanding forefinger at the door.

"Out!" she said. "Out! I don't do business with your kind!"

Fatima summed up her answer to this in a single unprintable word. She slammed the office door shut with a backward kick of the foot, hoisted the painting to the easel, and stripped its wrapping from it.

"Is it your business to refuse masterpieces, harpy?" she demanded. "Look at this."

Madame Lagrue looked. Then she looked again, her eyes opening wide in horror.

This painting was larger than any O'Toole had ever offered her before, and it was not the usual landscape. No, this time it was

a nude. A ripely curved, full-blown nude with not an inch of her fleshy body left to the imagination. And with Fatima in a tight, highly revealing blouse and skirt standing side by side with the painting, there was no doubt in Madame's shocked mind as to who its model had been. The nude was an uninspired pink and white, not swarthy as Fatima was, but it was without question Fatima's body so painstakingly delineated on the canvas.

But that was only the beginning of the horror, because while it was Fatima from the neck down, it was, abomination of abominations, Madame Lagrue herself from the neck up. Photographically exact, glass-eyed, the black flower pot upside down on the head with the dusty flowers sprouting from its crown, the stern face staring at Madame was Madame's own face.

"A masterpiece, eh?" said Fatima sweetly.

Madame made a strangled noise in her throat, then found her voice. "What an insult! What an outrage!"

She came to her feet prepared to rend the outrage to shreds, and suddenly there was a wicked little paring knife gleaming in Fatima's hand. Madame hastily sat down again.

"That's better," Fatima advised her. "Lay one little finger on this picture before you buy it, you

old sow, and I'll slice your nose off."

"Buy it?" Madame refused to believe her ears. "Do you really believe I'd buy an obscenity like that?"

"Yes. Because if you don't, Florelle will take it on commission. And he'll be glad to put it right in the middle of his window where everyone on Butte-Montmartre can see it. Then everyone in Paris. Those fancy Americans you do business with will see it, too. They'll all have a chance to see it, bloodsucker, because I'll tell Florelle not to sell it at any price for at least a year. It'll be worth it to him to keep in his window just to draw trade. Think that over. Think it over very carefully. I'm in no rush."

Madame thought it over very carefully for a long time.

"It's blackmail," she said at last in bitter resignation. "Plain blackmail. A shakedown, nothing more or less."

"You've hit the nail right on the head," Fatima said cheerfully.

"What if I submit to this blackmail?" Madame asked warily. "Can I do whatever I wish with this disgusting object?"

"Anything. If you pay its price."

"And what is its price?"

Fatima reached into a pocket and came up with a folded slip of paper which she waved tan-

talizingly just out of Madame's reach.

"The price is written down here, old lady. Now all you have to do is meet it, and the picture is yours. But remember this. Offer me one solitary franc less than what's written down on this paper, and the deal is off. There's no second chance. You get one turn in this game, that's all. Prove yourself one franc too thrifty, and the picture goes straight to Florelle."

"What kind of talk is that?" Madame demanded angrily. "A game, she says. I'm willing to do business with this creature, and she talks about games."

"Vulture," retorted Fatima. "Destroyer of helpless artists. Don't you think everyone knows this is the way you do business? *A vous la balle*, eh? Kindly dig your grave, artist, and bury yourself. Isn't that the way it goes? Well, now it's your turn to learn how it feels."

Madame opened her arms wide in piteous appeal. "But how can I possibly know what you intend to rob me of? How can I even guess what it would cost to buy you off?"

"True," admitted Fatima. "Well, I'm softhearted so I'll give you a hint. My man and I are moving to Bougie in Algeria, and we'll need travel money for that. And some decent clothes and a trunk to put them in. And we

want to buy a little house there—"

"A house!" said Madame, the blood draining from her face.

"A little house. Nothing much, but it must have electricity. And a motor bicycle to get around on."

Madame Lagrue clasped her hands tightly against her stout bosom and rocked back and forth in the chair. She looked at the nude on the easel and hastily averted her eyes from it.

"Dear God," she whimpered, "what have I done to deserve such treatment?"

"And," said Fatima relentlessly, "a little *pourboire*, a little money extra to put in the bank like respectable people should. That's what I see in my future, old lady. You've got a good head on your shoulders, so you shouldn't have much trouble adding it all up." She held up the slip of paper. "But make sure your arithmetic is right. Remember, you only get one chance to guess what's written here."

In her rage and frustration Madame found herself groping wildly for elusive figures. Travel money to Algeria, 300 francs. No, 400. No, better make it 500, because rather safe than sorry. Another 500 should certainly buy all the clothes needed for such a pair of ragamuffins. Throw in 100 for a trunk. But a house, even a mud hut, with electricity! M a d a m e

groaned aloud. What, in the devil's name, would that cost? Possibly 7000 or 8000 francs. And *pourboire*, the slut had said, and a motor bicycle. There was no use trying to work it all out to the exact franc. The best thing to do was call it a round 10,000.

Ten thousand francs! Madame Lagrue felt as if a cold wind were howling around her, as if she were being buried alive beneath a snowdrift of misery.

"Well?" said Fatima cruelly. "Let's have it. *A vous la balle, madame.*"

"I'll have the law on you," croaked Madame Lagrue. "I'll have the police destroy that scandalous object."

"Save your breath, miser. This is a work of art, and you know as well as I do that nobody destroys a work of art because it might bother someone. Now enough of such nonsense. What's your offer?"

Madame stared at the slip of paper in her tormentor's hand. Oh, for one little look at the figure written on it—

"Ten thousand," she gasped.

The look of contempt on Fatima's face, the curl of that lip, told Madame she had miscalculated after all, she had cut it too fine. She thought of the crowds gathered before Florelle's window staring with obscene delight at the picture; she thought of them gathering before

her own window, leering and nudging each other, hoping to get a glimpse of her in her disgrace. She'd never be able to go out on the street again. She'd be driven out of business in a month, a week—

"No, wait!" she cried. "I meant fifteen thousand! Of course, fifteen thousand. I don't know what got into me. It was a slip of the tongue!"

"You said ten thousand."

"I swear it was a mistake! Take fifteen. I insist you take it."

Fatima glanced at her slip of paper. She gnawed her lip, weighing the case in her mind. "All right, I'll be merciful. But I want my money right now."

"I don't have that much in cash here. I'll send the girl to the bank."

"And I want a paper to show that the deal is strictly on the level."

"Yes, of course. I'll make it out for you while we're waiting."

The pale, timid assistant must have run like a rabbit. She was back in almost no time with an envelope stuffed full of banknotes which she handed to Madame

Lagrué through the partly opened door of the office. Tears trickled down Madame's cheeks as she gave the money to Fatima.

"This is my life's blood," Madame said. "You've drained me dry, criminal."

"Liar, you've made a million from your poor painters," Fatima retorted. "It's time at least one of them was paid what you owe him."

As she left, she crumpled the slip of paper in her hand and carelessly tossed it to the floor.

"You don't have to see us off at the plane," she said in farewell. "Just stay here and enjoy your picture."

No sooner had the office door slammed behind her than Madame snatched up the crumpled paper from the floor and opened it with trembling fingers. Her eyes, as she saw the figure written on it in a large childish hand, almost bulged from her head.

Twenty francs!

Madame Lagrué wildly pounded her fists on the desk and screamed and screamed until the frightened assistant had to throw water in her face to quiet her.



DEPARTMENT OF SECOND STORIES

Gary Brandner's "first story" (EQMM's 345th) appeared in our August 1970 issue. At the end of our editorial introduction we said: "Thank the patron saint of mystery fiction, here is another bright prospect for the genre." And so it came to pass. Mr. Brandner's second story is an advance in every respect—a purely contemporary story that, in its own way, bridges the generation gap ...

SING TO ME, DEAD MAN

by GARY BRANDNER

I SAT ON THE STEPS OF THE cabin and sucked in a lungful of sweet mountain air. Inside, I imagined my "dead man" was pulling the wings off butterflies. I lit a cigarette and polluted a piece of the morning. After two weeks away from Los Angeles I was suffering from smog withdrawal. Among other things. I coughed and reminded myself that in a matter of hours my body-sitting chore would be over. And not a minute too soon.

It had sounded like an easy way to make \$2000 when Bernie Schumacher first put it to me.

We had arranged to meet in a dark little restaurant in the San Fernando Valley, well out of the Hollywood mainstream.

"I got a job for you, Dukane,

if you want it," Bernie had said. "You'll spend two weeks up in the mountains."

"Tell me about it."

Bernie took a long time sliding a menthol cigarette out of its green package and lighting it. He was thinner than I remembered him. His color had gone doughy, and he had lost a lot of hair.

"Do you remember Gideon Prince?" he asked.

I did. Three years before, Prince had been the hottest thing around in folk-pop-rock or whatever the kids were calling their music then. Bernie was his business manager.

"Yes, I remember Gideon Prince," I told him. "What ever happened to him? Wasn't there some kind of scandal, and the

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teenyboppers found themselves a new hairy hero?"

"That's about it. Two years ago there was an auto accident. Gideon was driving. There was a girl in the car with him—nice girl from a nice family. She was killed. There was an inquest, but no charges ever came out of it. It was pretty messy just the same, and it turned the kids off Gideon like a switch. What bothered them was not that he was responsible for killing the girl, but that he was going out with someone who belonged to the Establishment. Anyway, before the car accident every record he cut was an automatic million seller. In the last two years he's made two albums, and we can't give 'em away."

"Tough," I said. "I never met your boy, but from what I hear it couldn't have happened to a more deserving guy. I'm sorry for your sake, though. I hope you've got other things going."

Bernie used a napkin to dab at his forehead. "As a matter of fact, I don't. Like a dummy I put all my eggs in the Gideon basket, and it nearly wiped me out."

I remembered something. "Didn't I hear your boy's name on the news just recently? Something about him being dead, or *maybe* being dead—something like that."

Bernie sighed. "I'm glad,

Dukane, that you're at least somewhat aware of what's going on. If you weren't on the wrong side of the generation gap you'd know this is the biggest news in the pop music world since a similar thing happened with Paul McCartney."

"Oh, yeah, one of the Beatles. A rumor got going that he was dead, and the whole thing grew until he even made the cover of *Life*."

"Right. Gideon won't make any *Life* cover, but the underground newspapers and the teen magazines are eating it up. After all, McCartney belongs to England, but Gideon Prince is America's own."

"Sure. So, *is* he dead?"

"No. He's in a cabin up in the mountains above Big Bear Lake."

"Put there by you, I assume."

"Right."

"And with the phony death story whipping up interest I'll bet his records are all of a sudden selling like crazy again."

"You're getting the picture."

"Tell me, Bernie, did you start the rumor?"

He spread his small hands in a gesture of innocence. "I did not. As near as I can tell, it started a month ago with some small-time disk jockey up in Seattle. But the college kids picked it up, and from then on it was like a brush fire. Mind you, I'm

not saying I wouldn't have started it if I'd thought of it."

"Okay, so you're getting rich. Congratulations."

"Sadly enough, that's where you're wrong. I had to sign over all profits from Gideon's old records to some ugly creditors. It's what he does from now on that will get me into the black."

"Go on," I said.

"So I got together with some other people and put everything I could beg or borrow into a big promotion. Two weeks from Saturday in Orange County, we are holding the Gideon Prince Memorial Rock Festival. The theme is 'Sing to Me, Dead Man.' With all the free publicity from the death thing, this idea caught on like the Hong Kong flu. We've got some of the hottest pop groups in the country lined up and should get a quarter of a million kids there easy, all of them wondering will Gideon show up alive."

"And he will, I suppose?"

"Right. That's our finale. The kids will go wild and boom, we're back on top."

"If I'm following you," I said, "this whole promotion depends on Gideon staying dead until your Orange County blowout."

"You got it."

"And you need a private investigator for what?"

"All you have to do is stay with Gideon up there on the mountain and make sure he

doesn't come back to life before he's supposed to and blow everything."

"Bernie, if you mean holding him prisoner, that sounds like a felony rap to me."

"No, no, you won't need to do anything like that. Gideon knows how important this is. The Beatles didn't need a boost for their careers, but Gideon sure as hell does. But, frankly, Gideon can be something of a weirdo. And if he took it into his head to do some dumb thing that could cost us the whole ball game, it might help if there's a husky guy like you there to sort of reason with him. It's worth two thousand dollars to you."

"You make a powerful point. Two weeks, you say?"

"Right. I'll come and get him on the day of the Rock Festival and bring him back down."

"And it's understood I don't have to strongarm him to keep him there?"

"Understood. You are there only as a gentle persuader. If he absolutely insists on leaving—" Bernie finished the sentence with a shrug. "If that happens you might just give me a call so I can shoot myself."

"Okay," I said. "We've got a deal."

"Fine. I'll stop by your place tomorrow and you can follow me up to the cabin in your car. Now how about dinner?"

"No, thanks. I want to do some homework."

I finished my drink and went out to the parking lot where I ransomed my car from the skinny attendant for a buck. On my way home I stopped at a Sav-On drug store and bought all the magazines on the rack that had Gideon Prince's name or picture on the cover, and picked up his two latest albums.

Back at my place I made a cup of coffee with a slug of brandy in it, and put Gideon's two LP's on the turntable. I listened to the ragged shouting voice and the whanging amplified guitar for about ten minutes and dropped a second shot into the coffee. Then I turned the volume down and started through the magazines.

Most of the articles were about the same thing—the "clues" in Gideon's last two albums that proved he was dead. First, there were the album covers. One showed Gideon with his back turned, the other showed his face broken up as in a kaleidoscope. Plain messages that the man was defunct, right?

If that wasn't enough there were the song titles: *Take Off My Shoes*, *A Black Rose for Baby*, and so on. And in the lyrics somebody had found any number of obscure references to death. Also, they had played all the songs backward and at various

speeds. These tricks turned up, they said, strange voices saying things like, "Sing to me, dead man." The singing on the albums, the articles suggested, was put together from Gideon's old tapes plus the voice of an imitator.

The case for a dead Gideon was not too bad. But if you started with the premise that, say, Gideon Prince was really a movie starlet who was a male impersonator, you could find plenty of clues to prove that too.

I shoved the magazines aside, replaced Gideon with Mozart to cleanse my ears, and reclined in my adjustable chair. I said good night to the life-death saga of Gideon Prince and flipped to the *Herald* sports page to suffer with the California Angels.

Bernie roused me early the next morning. After a short breakfast I followed him out the San Bernardino Freeway and up into the mountains southwest of Los Angeles. We climbed past Lake Arrowhead and Big Bear, and the road kept getting narrower and the scenery more spectacular—if you like lush green trees, icy crystal lakes, and sparkling blue sky.

Abruptly we came upon the town of Lily. During the winter the town offered some fine slopes for serious skiers. Now in the summer Lily just dozed, waiting for the first snowfall to arrive

like Prince Charming and kiss her awake. There was a hotel (closed), a general store, a bar, and a gas station. All had the steep-angled, low-eaved roofs of the snow country.

We left my car in the care of the gas-station man and drove on in Bernie's.

The old logging road up to the cabin was a winding two miles that obviously hadn't been used by logging trucks or much else for years. The cabin was a sturdy A-frame of dark brown wood.

The mountain stillness around the cabin was being fouled by the braying sounds I now recognized as Gideon Prince and his semi-automatic guitar. There were no telephone lines to the cabin, but unfortunately there was electricity, so our friend had been able to lug up his hi-fi equipment and listen to his favorite singer at about a thousand decibels.

Bernie led me inside to meet the once and future recording star face to face—as much of his face as I could see, anyway. His dark hair hung in ropy strands over his ears and below his shoulders. He had a frazzly mustache and long sideburns, but his chin was naked in a strangely obscene way. He was wearing a stained denim shirt and striped, flare-bottom pants.

"Is this the keeper you found for me?" he said to Bernie. "What is he, an ex-pug?"

"Gideon, this is Adam Dukane," Bernie said, wiping his palms. "Try to get along, will you?"

"We'll get along," Gideon said. "Just tell him to keep out of my way unless I call for him. And tell him I like my eggs over hard and my steaks well done."

I reached out and slid the needle off the record that was playing. Then I walked across the room and stood in front of Gideon so that he had to look up at me. My six feet three gave me about seven inches on him.

"Let's understand a few things," I said. "First, when you've got something to say to me, my name is Adam or Dukane or hey, but not 'him.' Second, the way you eat your food is of no interest to me. And last, breaking you in half would probably void my contract, but you just might rile me to the point where the satisfaction would make up for the money I'd lose."

Gideon wet his plump little lips. "Don't get uptight. I guess I can stand anything for two weeks. Just don't stick too close to me, will you?"

"My pleasure," I told him.

Bernie let go a relieved sigh, then left us alone.

After that rotten beginning my relationship with Gideon deteriorated. The cabin was large enough so that I didn't have to

look at him all the time, but his damned record player kept the whole area racketing with his caterwauling.

Also, there was his idea of fun. Once I walked around the corner of the cabin and saw that he had caught one of the friendly little chipmunks that scurry around up there, and had tied it to a stake with string. He was about to do something to the little animal with a hunting knife when I grabbed his wrist. I eased off before I crushed the bone, but long after Gideon had dropped the knife. I cut the chipmunk loose and watched it skitter into the underbrush.

When Gideon got through squealing he flashed me a look so full of hate that I thought he might jump me. He didn't, though, robbing me of an excuse to spread him across the landscape.

We managed to see almost nothing of each other in the days that followed. I took to hiking the two miles down the grassy road to Lily where I shot the breeze with Max the gas-station man, a nice guy though a track fan.

So now I was sitting on the cabin steps and reminding myself that it would all be over in a few hours. I got up and headed down the hill to kill a couple of them with Max.

As I crossed the road to the gas station I passed a Volkswagen with those paper flowers stuck all over it.

"What's that?" I asked Max, who was frowning at the vehicle. "Carnival come to town?"

"Bunch of hippie types," Max grumbled. "All hair and flowers and beads. About eight of them, I guess. Hard to say how many were boys and how many girls."

"What do you suppose they're doing up here?"

"Lord knows. Pulled up here and parked about an hour ago. Then they all went leaping off into the woods like a bunch of Disney cartoon characters."

I didn't like the sound of that. My singing stiff was up in those woods. It would be too bad if he rejoined the living a couple of hours prematurely. I said a quick so-long to Max and jogged back up the old logging road.

I stopped outside the cabin door. Besides the familiar blare of a Gideon Prince record there was another sound—a girl's giggle.

I slammed in and saw them groping at each other on the sofa, Gideon and a girl about sixteen with pouches of baby fat and flat blonde hair. Gideon glared at me and the girl gazed around the room giggling and saying, "Wow." I grabbed a fringed Indian-style dress off the floor and tossed it at her. "Get lost, kid," I said.

She looked stupidly from me to the dress in her hands, then pulled the dress on over her head and walked unsteadily past me to the open door. She hesitated there and turned to look at me.

"Why are you so square when you could be so beautiful?" she said.

I put my hands lightly on her chubby shoulders and turned her around. With a little shove she went skipping down the road toward Lily to the tinkle of bells that must have been sewn into her dress. I assumed she would find the rest of her tribe.

From the sofa Gideon yelled, "What the hell's the matter with you?"

"If you didn't sit on your brains you'd know I just saved you from a damned serious charge. At least I hope I did."

"Aah. I didn't do anything to her—didn't have a chance with you busting in here like Captain America. Besides, she was so tripped out she didn't know what was happening. She didn't even know who I was. Why don't you get with it, dad, find out where it's at nowadays?"

"Button your lip." I clumped back outside and took deep breaths until the disgust inside me eased.

I was flinging rocks at a tree trunk which, in my mind, had Gideon Prince tied to it when Bernie drove up.

"Wait right there," he said. "I'll go get Walter O'Malley. Anybody who can throw like that might be the new Sandy Koufax."

"Forget it, I'm an Angel fan. Everything set for the big Lazarus scene?"

Bernie jumped from the car grinning and flapping his arms. "My friend, this Festival is going to be the biggest thing since World War II. We've got everybody who counts in pop music signed up except Bob Dylan, and he's still possible. The roads are jammed with kids coming from all over the country, plus Mexico and Canada. We might even outdraw Woodstock. They had four hundred thousand there."

"Fine," I said.

"Don't let your enthusiasm run away with you."

"I'm sorry, Bernie. I'm glad you're going to make lots of money, and that all those kids are going to have a real nice happening. And I suppose Orange County will recover. It's just that I am sick to death of rescuing chipmunks and little girls from the late Gideon Prince."

Bernie's eyes turned serious. "Believe me, Dukane, I can guess what it must have been like living with that one. But it's all over now. I appreciate the job you've done."

"Never mind the thanks," I said, "I didn't do it as a favor."

Bernie smiled and reached up

to clap me on the shoulder. "Come on inside and I'll write you a check," he said.

Gideon had seen the car drive up and was already banging around getting packed. He stuck his flushed face into the kitchen where Bernie and I were having a last cup of coffee and, ignoring me, said to Bernie, "Man, this is gonna be outa sight! Flash all those thousands and thousands of kids screamin' and cryin' and blowin' their minds—then the Prince walks onstage. Back from the dead. Groovy?"

"Yeah," Bernie said. "Groovy."

The Prince withdrew. I folded the check into my wallet. Bernie said, "You want to ride down with us to Lily to pick up your car?"

"No, thanks. I'll walk and enjoy the fresh air one more time."

Bernie reached into his coat and pulled out a white envelope. "Here," he said, "take in the Festival. On the house."

I said, "No, thanks. Even if I wanted to, I'd need a tank to get into the county."

"Nah, this is a participant's pass. It has a map that shows you a private road to get in and out. You shouldn't miss it, Dukane."

I pocketed the envelope. "I'll think about it."

Bernie and his friends had rented several acres of Orange

County that were filled that night with bodies. I stood behind the platform set up for the performers and looked out over the floodlit carpet of faces. There were boys and girls from age twelve to adults in their late twenties. The crowd surged and pulsed with a life of its own under a haze of marijuana that smelled like burning rope. They were noisy and excited, but seemed to be behaving.

On the platform four individuals calling themselves The Ugly Americans were providing amplified noise. A vendor pushed his way through the listeners peddling saucer-sized red and white buttons. For a buck you could buy *Gideon Lives!* or *Gideon Is Dead!*

Abruptly the Ugliers cut off their din and vanished. All the lights went out and a blinding white spot speared the center of the stage. The crowd noise dissolved to a murmur, and then somebody started a chant: "Gid-ee-on, Gid-ee-on, Gid-ee-on"—the way Latin Americans cheer their bullfighters. This went on for a full five minutes, swelling until each of the three syllables became a blast of sound.

Then Gideon stepped into the stark circle of light. The crowd drew its breath in a great sucking gasp. He stood blinking out over the faces for a moment, then he plugged in his guitar and began to sing.

It was the same nonmusical

croak I remembered so well. He sang a couple of bars and faltered as the crowd continued to respond with silence. Then from somewhere in the blackness the reedy voice of a girl called out, "We liked you better dead." Another answered, "Yeah, go on back to your grave." The boos started. They were a chill, hooting wind that grew to a snarling gale of contempt.

From where I stood I could see drops of perspiration ooze onto Gideon's face. He staggered through a few more bars, but even with his amplifier you couldn't hear him over the din of the mob.

Then they started to throw things. A wine bottle arced end over end and caught Gideon above the eye with a bony clunk.

Blood spurted from the cut and Gideon dropped his guitar and fled off the rear of the platform into the night. The hoots of the crowd changed to a wild giggling laughter. The lights were turned up and another rock group was hustled onto the stage. They were greeted with roaring applause.

Nobody would have to ask any more if Gideon Prince was alive or dead. I had just seen him publicly murdered—killed by the same people who had created him.

I slipped off the platform and walked back to the hidden road where I had left my car. From somewhere out in the weeds I heard a familiar voice sobbing uncontrollably.

"Go ahead," I thought. "Sing to me, dead man."



A perfectly delicious story, told with grace and charm, by an author who is new to the pages of EQMM but whose work has appeared in such prestigious magazines as "Playboy," "Esquire," "Vogue," and "Cosmopolitan."

Mr. Macauley, listen to our Oliver-Twistian plea: More, please . . .

It wasn't until after we purchased Mr. Macauley's story and wrote the short introduction above that we were told more details of his distinguished and impressive credentials. (There are times of editorial decision when we are almost proud of our ignorance!) Mr. Macauley is the author of TECHNIQUE IN FICTION, a popular university textbook, has taught creative-writing courses in various colleges, has been the editor of "Kenyon Review," and for the past three years (as of the time of this writing) has been the Fiction Editor of "Playboy" . . .

THE BARRINGTON QUALITY

by ROBIE MACAULEY

JOSHUA BARRINGTON, FOUNDER of the old and honorable London house of that name, would undoubtedly have been hanged by the neck until dead if he had fallen into the hands of George Washington. He was a printer turned sergeant in the army of General Sir William Howe, and in 1776 he took on the job of defeating His Majesty's rebellious subjects by counterfeiting huge amounts of the paper money issued by the colonies. It was one

of the earliest attempts to destroy the value of the dollar through massive inflation and Joshua deserves to be remembered as a pioneer in the field.

Fortunately for the cause of liberty, however, he was a conscientious craftsman of high standards. His fake continentals were printed on a good, thick grade of English paper with excellent engraving and presswork. The colonials immediately recognized them as counterfeits—the bills

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were obviously so superior to their own wretchedly printed legal tender. Thus Joshua barely escaped hanging by General Howe and thus, out of failure, the famous "Barrington quality" was born.

The second Joshua, who inherited a small unprofitable printing house in Hammersmith, early showed promise as an artist-engraver in a rather florid style. One day in the 1820's, as he pondered on his bad fortune, a simple but remarkable scheme for making money occurred to him. He immediately closed down his shop and began on a private project. Six months later he packed a large sample case and a small portmanteau and set out to visit all the backward countries he could locate on his map of the world.

On the paper currency of the ensuing period there is a great profusion of heraldry, allegory, and calligraphic flourish. When postage stamps appeared in the 1840's, there arose a demand for heroic portraits of kings, princes, presidents, and generals. Bonds and stock certificates called for an enormous amount of arabesque, scrollwork, decorative border—plus cornucopias, temples, and overweight ladies in trailing, diaphanous gowns.

The expansion of finance and the busy creation of still more backward countries brought new markets for these impressive

pieces of paper. Barrington's flourished. If anyone could make a one-eyed bandit of a general look like the Emperor Augustus, Barrington's could; if anyone could make a country composed of nomads, goats, and 70,000 acres of rock and sand appear to be heir to the glory that was Greece, Barrington's could.

The second Joshua's son and successor was knighted as Sir Kenelm Barrington. In time he became the master of a large house in Kensington, a yacht, a fine stable of horses, an estate in Surrey, a wife, six children, and a villa in St. John's Wood where lived his little friend, a girl with the sweetest face and trimmest pair of legs in London. To the printing house Sir Kenelm added a private mint which turned out excellent coinage for all those unpronounceable countries at the far ends of the earth.

The firm had become a solid institution by the end of the century when Sir Kenelm finally passed on to that better place where, it is said, large ladies in Grecian dress float about playing on musical instruments and dispensing dividends of 35%, paid in gold. His oldest son succeeded to his wealth and dignities, became Sir Maurice, and, in the course of natural events, the father of a lovely girl.

She was born about the time the Germans were being so dif-

ficult, and just about the time when both the Empire and the house of Barrington began to feel a chill wind from over the sea. Somehow the overblown symbolic figures, the gilt edges and the arabesques, had started to decline in popularity. Primitive countries bought their own printing presses and began to turn out their own ill-favored currency and hideous magenta-colored stamps. "On the theory," Sir Maurice used to say, "that what may become worthless may as well look worthless." Too often beautiful engraving and heavy parchment had failed to inspire confidence in a government whose treasury reserves were gone.

By the early 1930's, Barrington's was in deep trouble. Its best customers of former days had either escaped by the back doors of their palaces or had been marched out the front to firing squads in the courtyard. Sir Maurice haughtily refused several orders that called for stamping the portraits of usurping scoundrels on some cheap new alloy. Finally, baffled, he began to devote most of his time to hunting and fishing, and he left the grand old firm to crumble slowly under the management of his director, Judson Turbid. Stout, pink-faced gentlemen, sitting over walnuts and port, shook their heads sadly when the name of Barrington came into the conversation.

Now, lunching at the Savoy, stopping with friends on the Riviera, supping after theater at Rule's, or playing tennis at a long-weekend houseparty in Bucks, Lucretia Barrington had no hint of this. Being lovely and being pursued by several rich young men and several poor young men of good family—that took up practically all her time. Despite the fact that Lucretia bought her clothes in Paris, had once appeared as a minor character in a novel by Mr. Evelyn Waugh, and had gone hiking in Scotland quite unchaperoned, she was a most respectable young lady. Sooner or later she would select and marry some worthy young man who was as much like a Barrington as possible.

Then an odd thing began to happen.

First with the poor young men—they no longer asked her to dance or to go riding with them in the park. Then, one by one, the rich young men stopped telephoning. A titled suitor who had proposed to her four times, both drunk and sober, suddenly married the fat daughter of a famous distiller. Lucretia put it down to pure thirst. Then there were two left, and finally just one. But, since that one was a young man with many solid virtues—he was the son of a poor but honest baronet—she'd always had him in mind as an eventuality. In fact,

there was something of an understanding between them.

One day he asked her to lunch at Scott's.

"Peter, what's wrong with you? You keep smoking cigarettes instead of eating your scampi."

"Er—well, I'm afraid it's something sticky I must tell you. Promise not to be hard and bitter."

"You've forgotten your money and I'll have to pay the bill."

"I wish that were all. It does have to do with money though, worse luck. You see, I'd hoped to ask you to marry me. But, as you well know, I haven't a penny."

Lucretia laughed. It was the prettiest sound that had been heard in Scott's for months and quite a few people looked up from their plates to see who was so happy. "You dear old imbecile. I have enough money for both of us. Why, Barrington's print it by the ton."

"I don't mean silly drachmas or pengös or whatever. I mean sterling."

"But I have lots of that, too."

Peter looked down at his hands and didn't speak for some time. "I'm afraid the point is that you haven't. For you to marry someone as poor as I am would be madness." Finally he had to tell her what all the world knew about Barrington's. Lucretia turned pale, gave a little shudder, and

began bravely to talk about the yacht show.

She cabbed to the house in Kensington, took a sleeping tablet, and went to bed. In the middle of the night she woke up. In her sleep the thought had come to her: "I must marry a ruthless scoundrel."

She waited for a few minutes and then the perfect solution came to her: Martin Chance. She took another tablet and went back to sleep.

As a matter of fact, Martin was the only real scoundrel she knew. He was a handsome young man whose plausibility and polish were well-known around gaming tables and in certain bottle clubs familiar to the police. There was a Canon Chance living in Yorkshire who, when asked about Martin, would reply dourly, "I no longer have a son of that name."

The first time Lucretia had met Martin, she had thrown a glass of gin-and-french into his face because of something he had done under the night-club table. The second time, they exchanged rude remarks. Martin seemed to be attracted to her. She now decided to use him as a weapon to restore the greatness of the house of Barrington.

In a very short time Lucretia had engineered another meeting. During the next few weeks thereafter, she could be seen with

Martin in any number of low places—the racecourse, French casinos, Greek restaurants in Soho, and some of the more sinister night clubs. Gradually a number of curious changes took place in the two of them. Martin began to drop his sneering, sarcastic tone. Lucretia found herself, at times, using some bloody awful language she'd picked up here and there. Martin began to worry about whether she might be seeing other young men. Lucretia learned to enjoy gambling and soon lost £50 on the horses and another £50 at roulette. One Sunday, driving back from Hampstead, Martin said a great number of foolish things, ending up with a passionate proposal of marriage.

Of course this was a definite item in Lucretia's long-range scheme. She had planned to marry Martin and train his sharp talents for bigger things. What she had failed to foresee was that he was not nearly so bad as she had supposed, and she was not nearly so good. What was worse, she had fallen in love. Muddles like this often end up in marriage, willy-nilly.

They eloped—but they might have saved themselves the trouble. Sir Maurice did not notice; in fact, he welcomed Martin with much cordiality when he learned that he was the son of Canon Chance (who had been up at Ox-

ford with one of the Barrington cousins), himself suggested that Martin take a position in the firm, and then went back to snuffing out the lives of fish and birds.

Martin grew a mustache, took a flat in Knightsbridge, took in *The Times*, and made it a point to cut all his old pals. He appeared every morning at eight sharp in the office, to the extreme mortification of Judson Turbid, who always stayed behind to count the money after Martin had left in the afternoon. It was not long, however, before Turbid had an inspiration.

He would make Martin a salesman. On the one hand, that would take him away from London for long periods of time and, on the other, it would give him something harmless to do. Nowadays a salesman for Barrington's had very little he could possibly muddle up. Thus Mr. Bede, the single remaining traveling salesman for Barrington's, was retired at the age of 68 to a small cottage in Sussex, and Martin was installed. Very shortly after that, Judson Turbid received a visit from a fat olive-colored little man who introduced himself as the Consul-General of the Republic of San Isidro.

Far away in this little-known country General César Romulo Fuego y Caliente was busy sweeping out corruption and putting San Isidro to rights after the

recent revolution. His first act in the way of cultural improvement was to send to Italy for an equestrian statue of himself to be set up in the capital's principal plaza. His second reform was to be a new issue of government bonds and currency. As the consul explained to Judson Turbid, the United States of America, tired of disorder in that part of the continent, had recognized General Fuego as an outstanding patriot and had granted extensive credits to his new régime. As a result, the new certificates would be worth something more than the paper they were printed on. What was more, the successful bidder for the contract would do very nicely indeed.

When Lucretia heard the news she was quite pleased for a moment and then quite upset. "Oh, Martin, I hope that you won't let any of those Spaniards tempt you back into your old habits!" she said.

"My darling, as you know very well, I'm completely reformed, thanks to you," he replied.

Martin worked long and hard supervising the preparation of samples. When all was ready, Lucretia and Judson Turbid saw him off on the boat train. One of them was imagining his triumphant return with all sorts of success and fat orders. The other was thinking of possible shipwrecks or, perhaps, a sudden

counter-revolution in which all foreigners would be lined up and shot. Judson would settle for any luck that would prevent the old firm from falling, at last, into the hands of a cad.

Judson Turbid was also aware of something he had not bothered to tell Martin: Barrington's had not the faintest of forlorn hopes. The San Isidreans had invited several more progressive English firms. A couple of American companies with quite up-to-date artists (they went in for Rockwell Kent-style views of buildings and industrial complexes) were also competing—to say nothing of an odd lot of German, Japanese, and other firms. Judson took a mournful pleasure in knowing all this.

Once aboard at Southampton, Martin got his luggage stowed away in the broom-closet-sized tourist-class cabin and immediately headed for the first-class lounge. Much to his astonishment he discovered Herr Helmuth Trinker (*Die Staatspapiere Druckerei*, Hamburg), Monsieur Jacques Delaine (*Imprimerie Delaine*, Paris), and two English engraver-printer representatives engaged in a friendly game of chance.

"*Quelle surprise!*" said M. Delaine, making room for him, "Barenton's is still showing the flag, *hein?*"

"More than that," said Martin

coolly, "we have a new line that will make San Isidro delirious with joy."

"You haf discovered how to crowd even more classic antiquities on the paper?" Herr Trinker asked in a sarcastic tone.

"Exactly," said Martin, "and we've made them so they glow in the dark."

Then, by tacit agreement, they stopped talking business. Many drinks and many games later they saw the coast of the new world come into view over the horizon. They disembarked at a hot and squalid tropical port. After no more than a two-day wait they were able to board a hot and squalid train for San Isidro.

The Grand Hotel Monte-Carlo, San Isidro's best, is situated on a sun-scorched plaza, directly across from the presidential palace. After a brief tour of the town and the worst dinner in living memory they went into the bar and called for the cards. Martin was sitting with Solmson (Imperial Engraving) and Higgs (Marker and Son, Ltd.) and Herr Trinker. After a while they were joined by Delaine, a Japanese, and two Americans. These gentlemen had just returned to the hotel after discovering that all places of entertainment in the city had been temporarily closed down by the revolution. Having played with great luck and skill all during the voyage, Martin now found seven-

card stud with almost everything wild too much for him, and he lost heavily.

"I think you got the jitters, kid," said a lean American named Stanley Barton.

"And no vondaire," said Delaine, "all of this boring voyage to no purpose. One may assume that Imprimerie Delaine has the contract in the sack."

"Not so fast, old boy," Higgs said. "Whose designs are taking the Balkans by storm? Not Delaine's. It's Markers', that's whose." A general argument followed. Since there was now no point in keeping any design a secret, they finally agreed that everybody should show his samples. Each one of them seemed to have a desire to overawe the competition—and so Higgs invited them all to his room for whiskey and the viewing.

Higgs was first. He brought out a large wooden case, unlocked it, and folded the two halves back. Lying under glass, on a rich background of blue velvet, his samples were most impressive. The one, five, and ten peso coins glinted sharply. The twenty, fifty, and one-hundred peso notes caught the eye. On a background of flaming oranges and purples the battlefield triumphs of General Fuego were shown in lavish and heroic detail.

"I believe that the skirmish in front of the brewery was the only

real military action of the revolution," said the Japanese.

Evidently Mitsayama felt a little encroached on because his own bonds and bills—which were next—were also devoted to General Fuego. The dictator was shown in many noble attitudes: as a statesman, as a leader addressing the multitude, and as a planner clutching compass and blueprints. They were all very artistically done. The viewers were silent. Finally Higgs said, "You *have* made him look a bit slant-eyed, you know."

Helmuth Trinker's designs tended to brawny husbandmen and strong horses. Then, on the bonds, were shown two muscular pioneers clearing the jungle with ax and machete. The beholders took silent satisfaction in noting that the real San Isidro seemed to be largely cactus and dry, eroded hills.

They caught their breaths when Delaine's samples came out. And for a long time they stood entranced, staring at the delicate curves and the bare bosoms of imaginary Indian girls from San Isidrean history.

At last the company turned, with somewhat patronizing expressions, in Martin's direction. "Well, gentlemen," he said, "truth to tell, Barrington's have stuck by their traditional designs, and there's nothing new to see. Our currency appeals to the basic

sense of beauty and proportion instinctive in man—and not to passing whims and fancies." They all took the words as an open confession of defeat.

The next morning they were gathered again in the anteroom of the presidential office. One by one each was called to bring his samples in for the interview. Finally it was Martin's turn. He entered an enormous room, rather bare except for some large oil portraits on the wall. Martin assumed that the vacant places where portraits had been removed indicated corrupt cabinet ministers no longer hung but perhaps hanged. General Fuego was dressed in civilian clothes, but he had a military jaw and a martial scowl as he sat behind his huge uncluttered desk.

"Ah, Señor Shans?" he said. "From the ancient house of Barrington's, no? I hope that your company has moved with the times, no?"

Smiling broadly and doing his best with the sales talk, Martin brought out his small case of samples.

The general scowled harder. "But it is not possible!" he said. "The workmanship she is good, sí, but the ornamenti and the representations, they are so antique, no? Is that the goddess Ceres I see bringing in those sheaves? And we have no Parthenon here, Señor

Shans. San Isidro will become a modern country—skyscrapers, income tax, traffic jams, just as in London.”

“The thing about bonds and paper currency,” Martin said, “is that they should inspire confidence. Make people think of the Roman Empire and all that. Look at this thousand peso note—remarkable likeness of Mars, don’t you think?”

“Mars, *si*,” said the leader. “But where is Fuego? Not a single portrait of my own self. Ah, well, Señor Shans, all the entries shall be judged by me and the Minister of Commerce. We shall inform the bidders of the result this evening.” In lieu of a goodbye he scowled slightly less.

That evening the Minister of Commerce appeared in the hotel lounge. He made a speech in which he thanked all the competitors, one by one, with lavish compliments. Each began to think that he had triumphed. Then the minister announced that Barrington’s had unquestionably won the contract. There was a simultaneous gasp.

A happy Martin signed the papers and stood everybody to a drink. The others were shattered, but they were as sporting about it as foreigners can bring themselves to be. “It is the tradition of English solidity. The extreme thickness of that paper,” said Mitsayama.

“Certainment, it is inartistic stuff,” said Delaine, “but, unfortunately, that very fact makes it appear to be real money.”

Martin’s voyage home passed like a pleasant dream. He arrived in Knightsbridge, kissed his pretty Lucretia many times, and telephoned Sir Maurice with the good news. That afternoon the three of them, with Judson Turbid, sat in Sir Maurice’s office over celebration sherry. Turbid pretended that he’d never had a qualm.

“In the long run quality always wins,” he said.

“Quite,” said Sir Maurice. “But I’m curious to know how you convinced the good general. What was your spiel, as I believe it is called nowadays?”

“Oh, the money spoke for me,” Martin said. “I’m afraid that I’m hardly very good at hawking things.”

“The Barrington quality, of course,” Turbid broke in. “The artistic appeal, the fine parchment, the—”

“Actually,” said Martin, “the general detested the look of the stuff, as I thought he very well might. So I had prepared a little surprise. Just as the general was dismissing me and saying that he and the Minister of Commerce would judge the competition, I had several large crates of our currency brought in through a side

door. All our rivals, you see, had brought one-of-a-kind samples, but I'd had a few thousands printed up, mainly of the large denominations. It seemed hardly necessary to point out that when the new currency went into circulation, the general would have the good luck to possess the largest personal fortune in the country. All backed by the

reliability of the Yankee loan, of course."

Sir Maurice mused a moment. Then he raised his glass in a toast to the portrait of Joshua Barrington on the wall. "Ah, ancestor," he said, "if you'd only had the wit to do the same with that fellow George Washington, the course of history might have been a bit happier."



CRIMINALIMERICK

AT LEAST HE MAKES NIGHT CALLS

by D. R. BENSEN

Watson's a working G.P.,
 Thorndyke's a full-fledged M.D.;
 But the thought comes with grue
 When I read Fu Manchú —
 Just *what* sort of Doctor is he?

© 1970 by D. R. Bensen.

a NERO WOLFE detective SHORT NOVEL by
REX STOUT

complete in this issue

Can you trust an eyewitness to murder? Absolutely? Well, not always. Then how about an earwitness to murder? It's a provocative question—just as Nero Wolfe's questions, and Archie Goodwin's, are always provocative—especially in one of Nero Wolfe's most unusual inquiries, one in which he had no client, no case, and worst of all (Nero is a professional) no fee in prospect. Now, join Nero and Archie in their investigation of murder in the world of high fashion . . .

A stylish short novel complete in this issue . . .

MURDER IS NO JOKE

by REX STOUT

I WAS A LITTLE DISAPPOINTED in Flora Gallant when she arrived that Tuesday morning for her eleven-o'clock appointment with Nero Wolfe. Her getup was a letdown. One of my functions as Wolfe's factotum is checking on people who phone for an appointment with him, and when I had learned that Flora Gallant was one of the staff of her brother Alec's establishment on East Fifty-fourth Street, and remembered remarks a friend of mine

named Lily Rowan had made about Alec Gallant, I had phoned Lily for particulars.

And got them. Gallant was crowding two others for top ranking in the world of high fashion. He thumbed his nose at Paris and sneered at Rome, and was getting away with it. He had refused to finish three dresses for the Duchess of Harwynd because she postponed flying over from London for fittings. He declined to make anything whatever for a

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certain famous movie actress because he didn't like the way she handled her hips when she walked. He had been known to charge as little as \$800 for an afternoon frock, but it had been for a favorite customer so he practically gave it away.

And so forth. Therefore when I opened the door to admit his sister Flora that Tuesday morning it was a letdown to see a dumpy middle-aged female in a dark gray suit that was anything but spectacular. It needed pressing, and the shoulders were too tight, and her waist wasn't where it thought it was. As I ushered her down the hall to the office and introduced her to Wolfe, I was thinking that if the shoemaker's son went barefoot I supposed his sister could too, but all the same I felt cheated.

Her conversation was no more impressive than her costume, at least at the beginning. Seated on the edge of the red leather chair beyond the end of Wolfe's desk, the fingers of both hands gripping the rim of the gray leather bag on her lap, she apologized, in a low meek mumble with just a trace of a foreign accent, for asking such an important man as Nero Wolfe to give any of his valuable time to her and her troubles. That didn't sound promising, indicating as it did that she was looking for a bargain. As she went on with it Wolfe started a frown

going, and soon he cut her off by saying that it would take less of his time if she would tell him what her troubles were.

She nodded. "I know. I just wanted you to understand that I don't expect anything for myself. I'm not anybody myself, but you know who my brother is? My brother Alec?"

"Yes. Mr. Goodwin has informed me. An illustrious dressmaker."

"He is not merely a dressmaker. He is an artist, a great artist." She wasn't arguing, just stating a fact. "This trouble is about him, and that's why I must be careful with it. That's why I come to you, and also"—she sent me a glance and then back to Wolfe—"also Mr. Archie Goodwin, because I know that although you are private detectives, you are gentlemen. I know you are worthy of confidence."

She stopped, apparently for acknowledgement. Wolfe obliged her. "Umph."

"Then it is understood I am trusting you?"

"Yes. You may."

She looked at me. "Mr. Goodwin?"

"Right. Whatever Mr. Wolfe says. I only work here."

She hesitated, seeming to consider if that was satisfactory, decided it was, and returned to Wolfe. "So I'll tell you. I must,

explain that in France, where my brother and I were born and brought up, our name was not 'Gallant.' What it was doesn't matter. I came to this country in nineteen-thirty-seven, when I was twenty-five years old, and Alec only came in nineteen-forty-five, after the war was over. He had changed his name to Gallant and entered legally under that name. Within seven years he had made a reputation as a designer, and then— Perhaps you remember his fall collection in nineteen-fifty-three?"

Wolfe grunted no.

Her right hand abandoned its grip on the bag to gesture. "But of course you are not married, and you have no mistress, feeling as you do about women. That collection showed what my brother was—an artist, a true creator. He got financial backing, more than he needed, and opened his place on Fifty-fourth Street. I had quit my job four years earlier—my job as a governess—in order to work with him and help him, and had changed my name to have it the same as his. From nineteen-fifty-three on it has been all a triumph, many triumphs. I will not say I had a hand in them, but I have been trying to help in my little way. The glory of great success has been my brother's, but I have been with him, and so have others. Now trouble has come."

Both hands were gripping the bag again. "The trouble," she said, "is a woman. A woman named Bianca Voss."

Wolfe made a face. She saw it and responded to it. "No, not an *affaire d'amour*, I'm sure it's not that. Though my brother has never married, he is by no means insensible to women, he is very healthy about women, but since you are worthy of confidence I may tell you that he has an *amie intime*, a young woman who is of importance in his establishment. It is impossible that Bianca Voss has attracted him that way. She first came there a little more than a year ago. My brother had told us to expect her, so he had met her somewhere. He designed a dress and a suit for her, and they were made there in the shop, but no bill was ever sent her.

"Then he gave her one of the rooms on the third floor, and she started to come every day, and then the trouble began. My brother never told us she had any authority, but she took it and he allowed her to. Sometimes she interferes directly, and sometimes through him. She pokes her nose into everything. She got my brother to discharge a fitter, a very capable woman, who had been with him for years. She has a private telephone line in her office upstairs, but no one else has. About two months ago some of the others persuaded me to

try to find out about her, what her standing is, and I asked my brother, but he wouldn't tell me. I begged him to, but he wouldn't."

"It sounds," Wolfe said, "as if she owns the business. Perhaps she bought it."

Flora Gallant shook her head. "No, she hasn't. I'm sure she hasn't. She wasn't one of the financial backers in nineteen-fifty-three, and since then there have been good profits, and anyway my brother has control. But now she's going to ruin it and he's going to let her, we don't know why. She wants him to design a factory line to be promoted by a chain of department stores using his name. She wants him to sponsor a line of Alec Gallant cosmetics on a royalty basis. And other things. We're against all of them, and my brother is too, really, but we think he's going to give in to her, and that will ruin it."

Her fingers tightened on the bag. "Mr. Wolfe, I want you to ruin her."

Wolfe grunted. "By wiggling a finger?"

"No, but you can. I'm sure you can. I'm sure she has some hold on him, but I don't know what. I don't know who she is or where she came from. I don't know what her real name is. She speaks with an accent, but not French; I'm not sure what it is. I don't know when she came to

America; she may be here illegally. She may have known my brother in France, during the war. You can find out. If she has a hold on my brother you can find out what it is. If she is blackmailing him, isn't that against the law? Wouldn't that ruin her?"

"It might. It might ruin him too."

"Not unless you betrayed him." She swallowed that and added hastily, "I don't mean that, I only mean I am trusting you, you said I could, and you could make her stop and that's all you would have to do. Couldn't you just do that?"

"Conceivably." Wolfe wasn't enthusiastic. "I fear, madam, that you're biting off more than you can chew. The procedure you suggest would be prolonged, laborious, and extremely expensive. It would probably require elaborate investigation abroad. Aside from my fee, which would not be modest, the outlay would be considerable and the outcome highly uncertain. Are you in a position to undertake it?"

"I am not rich myself, Mr. Wolfe. I have some savings. But my brother—if you get her away, if you release him from her—he is truly *généreux*—excuse me—he is a generous man. He is not stingy."

"But he isn't hiring me, and your assumption that she is galling him may be groundless." Wolfe shook his head. "No. Not a

reasonable venture. Unless, of course, your brother himself consults me. If you care to bring him? Or send him?"

"Oh, I couldn't!" She gestured again. "You must see that isn't possible! When I asked him about her, I told you, he wouldn't tell me anything. He was annoyed. He is never abrupt with me, but he was then. I assure you, Mr. Wolfe, she is a villain. You are *sagace*—excuse me—you are an acute man. You would know it if you saw her, spoke with her."

"Perhaps." Wolfe was getting impatient. "Even so, my perception of her villainy wouldn't avail. No, madam."

"But you would know I am right." She opened her bag, fingered in it with both hands, came out with something, left her chair to step to Wolfe's desk, and put the something on his desk pad in front of him. "There," she said. "That is one hundred dollars. For you that is nothing, but it shows how I am in earnest. I can't ask her to come so you can speak with her, she would merely laugh at me, but you can. You can tell her you have been asked in confidence to discuss a matter with her and ask her to come to see you. You will not tell her what it is. She will come, she will be afraid not to, and that alone will show you she has a secret, perhaps many secrets. Then when she comes you will

ask her whatever occurs to you. For that you do not need my suggestions. You are an acute man."

Wolfe grunted. "Everybody has secrets."

"Yes," she agreed, "but not secrets that would make them afraid not to come to see Nero Wolfe. When she comes and you have spoken with her, we shall see. That may be all or it may not. We shall see."

I do not say that the hundred bucks there on his desk in used twenties was no factor in Wolfe's decision. Even though income tax would reduce it to sixteen dollars, that would buy four days' supply of beer. Another factor was plain curiosity: would she come or wouldn't she? Still another was the chance that it might develop into a decent fee.

But what really settled it was her saying, "We shall see" instead of "We'll see" or "We will see." He will always stretch a point, within reason, for people who use words as he thinks they should be used. So he muttered at her, "Where is she?"

"At my brother's place. She always is."

"Give Mr. Goodwin the phone number."

"I'll get it. She may be downstairs." She started a hand for the phone on Wolfe's desk, but I told her to use mine and left my chair, and she came and

sat, lifted the receiver, and dialed.

In a moment she spoke. "Doris? Flora. Is Miss Voss around? . . . Oh. I thought she might have come down . . . No, don't bother, I'll ring her there."

She pushed the button down, told us, "She's up in her office," waited a moment, released the button, and dialed again. When she spoke it was another voice, as she barely moved her lips and brought it out through her nose: "Miss Bianca Voss? Hold the line, please. Mr. Nero Wolfe wishes to speak with you. . . . Mr. Nero Wolfe, the private detective."

She looked at Wolfe and he got at his phone. Having my own share of curiosity, I extended a hand for my receiver, and she let me take it and left my chair. As I sat and got it to my ear Wolfe was speaking.

"This is Nero Wolfe. Is this Miss Bianca Voss?"

"Yes." It was more like "yiss."

"What do you want?" The "wh" and the "w" were off.

"If my name is unknown to you, I should explain—"

"I know your name. What do you want?"

"I want to invite you to call on me at my office. I have been asked to discuss certain matters with you, and—"

"Who asked you?"

"I am not at liberty to say."

"What matters?" The "wh" was more off.

"If you will let me finish. The matters are personal and confidential, and concern you closely. That's all I can say on the telephone. I am sure you—"

A snort stopped him, a snort that might be spelled "Tzchaahh!" followed by: "I know your name, yes! Your are scum, I know, in your stinking sewer! Your slimy little ego in your big gob of fat! And you dare to—*owulghh!*"

That's the best I can do at spelling it. It was part scream, part groan, and part just noise. It was followed immediately by another noise, a mixture of crash and clatter, then others, faint rustlings, and then nothing. I looked at Wolfe and he looked at me. I spoke to my transmitter. "Hello hello hello. *Hello! Hello?*"

I cradled it and so did Wolfe. Flora Gallant was asking, "What is it? She hung up?"

"We ignored her. Wolfe said, "Archie? You heard."

"Yes, sir. If you want a guess, something hit her and she dragged the phone along as she went down and it struck the floor. The other noises, not even a guess, except that at the end either she put the receiver back on and cut the connection or someone else did. I don't— Okay, Miss Gallant. Take it easy."

She had grabbed my arm with both hands and was jabbering, "What is it? What happened?" I put a hand on her shoulder

and made it emphatic. "Take a breath and let go. You heard what I told Mr. Wolfe. Apparently something fell on her and then hung up the phone."

"But it couldn't! It is not possible!"

"That's what it sounded like. What's the number? The one downstairs?"

She just gawked at me. I looked at Wolfe and he gave me a nod, and I jerked my arm loose, sat at my desk, got the Manhattan book, flipped to the Gs and got the number, PL2-0330, and dialed it.

A cultured female voice came. "Alec Gallant, Incorporated."

"This is a friend of Miss Voss," I told her. "I was just speaking to her on the phone, in her office, and from the sounds I got I think something may have happened to her. Will you send someone up to see? Right away. I'll hold the wire."

"Who is this speaking, please?"

"Never mind that. Step on it. She may be hurt."

I heard her calling to someone, then apparently she covered the transmitter. I sat and waited. Wolfe sat and scowled at me. Flora Gallant stood for a good five minutes at my elbow, staring down at me, then turned and went to the red leather chair and lowered herself onto its edge. I looked at my wrist watch: 11:40. It had said 11:31 when the con-

nection with Bianca Voss had been cut. More waiting, and then a male voice came.

"Hello?"

"Hello."

"This is Carl Drew. What is your name, please?"

"My name is Watson, John H. Watson. Is Miss Voss all right?"

"May I have your address, Mr. Watson, please?"

"What for? Miss Voss knows my address. Is she all right?"

"I must have your address, Mr. Watson. I must insist. You will understand the necessity when I tell you that Miss Voss is dead. She was assaulted in her office and is dead. Apparently, from what you said, the assault came while she was on the phone with you, and I want your address. I must insist."

I hung up, gently not to be rude, swiveled, and asked Flora Gallant, "Who is Carl Drew?"

"He's the business manager. What happened?"

I went to Wolfe. "My guess was close. Miss Voss is dead. In her office. He said she was assaulted, but he didn't say with what or by whom."

He glowered at me, then turned to let her have it. She was coming up from the chair, slow and stiff. When she was erect she said, "No. No. It isn't possible."

"I'm only quoting Carl Drew," I told her.

"It isn't possible. He said that?"

"Distinctly."

"But how—" She let it hang. She said, "But how—" stopped again, turned, and was going. When Wolfe called to her, "Here, Miss Gallant, your money," she paid no attention but kept on, and he poked it at me, and I took it and headed for the hall. I caught up with her halfway to the front door, but when I offered it she just kept going, so I blocked her off, took her bag and opened it and dropped the bills in and closed it, handed it back, and went and pulled the door open. She hadn't said a word.

I stood on the sill and watched, thinking she might stumble going down the seven steps of the stoop, but she made it to the sidewalk and turned east, toward Ninth Avenue. When I got back to the office Wolfe was sitting with his eyes closed, breathing down to his big round middle. I went to my desk and put the phone book away.

"She is so stunned with joy," I remarked, "that she'll probably get run over. I should have gone and put her in a taxi."

He grunted.

"One thing," I remarked, "Miss Voss's last words weren't exactly *généreux*. I would call them caty."

He grunted.

"Another thing," I remarked, "in spite of the fact that I was John H. Watson on the phone,

we'll certainly be called on by either Sergeant Stebbins or Inspector Cramer or both. When they go into whereabouts, Flora will have to cough it up for her own protection. And we actually heard it. Also we'll have the honor of being summoned to the stand. Star witnesses."

He opened his eyes. "I'm quite aware of it," he growled. "Confound it. Bring me the records on Laelia gouldiana."

No orchid ever called a genius a slimy little ego in a big gob of fat. I remarked that too, but to myself.

"Sure I appreciate it," Cramer declared. "Why shouldn't I? Very thoughtful of you. Saves me time and trouble. So it was eleven thirty-one when you heard the blow?"

Inspector Cramer, big and brawny with a round red face and all his hair, half of it gray, had nothing to be sarcastic about as he sat in the red leather chair at six thirty that Tuesday afternoon, and he knew it, but he couldn't help it. It was his reaction, not to the present circumstances, but to his memory of other occasions, other experiences he had undergone in that room. He had to admit that we had saved him time and trouble when I had anticipated his visit by typing out a complete report of the session with Flora Gallant that morning, including

the dialogue verbatim, and having it ready for him in duplicate, signed by both Wolfe and me. He had skimmed through it first, and then read it slowly and carefully.

"We heard no blow, identifiably," Wolfe objected. His bulk was comfortably arranged in his oversize chair back of his desk. "Mr. Goodwin wrote that statement, but I read it, and it does not say that we heard a blow."

Cramer found the place on page four and consulted it. "Okay. You heard a groan and a crash and rustles. But there *was* a blow. She was hit in the back of the head with a chunk of marble, a paperweight, and then a scarf was tied around her throat to stop her breathing. You say here at eleven thirty-one."

"Not when we heard the groan," I corrected. "After that there were the other noises, then the connection went, and I said hello a few times, which was human but dumb. It was when I hung up that I looked at my watch and saw eleven thirty-one. The groan had been maybe a minute earlier. Say eleven thirty. If a minute is important."

"It isn't. But you didn't hear the blow?"

"Not to recognize it, no."

He went back to the statement, frowning at it, reading the whole first page and glancing at the others. He looked up, at Wolfe.

"I know how good you are at arranging words. This implies that Flora Gallant was a complete stranger to you, that you had never had anything to do with her or her brother or any of the people at that place, but it doesn't say so in so many words. I'd like to know."

"The implication is valid," Wolfe told him. "Except as related in that statement, I have never had any association with Miss Gallant or her brother, or, to my knowledge, with any of their colleagues. Nor has Mr. Goodwin. Archie?"

"Right," I agreed.

"Okay." Cramer folded the statement and put it in his pocket. "Then you had never heard Bianca Voss's voice before and you couldn't recognize it on the phone."

"Of course not."

"And you can't hear it now, since she's dead. So you can't swear it was her talking to you."

"Obviously."

"And that raises a point. If it was her talking to you, she was killed at exactly half-past eleven. Now there are four important people in that organization who had it in for Bianca Voss. They have admitted it. Besides Flora Gallant, there is Anita Prince, fitter and designer, been with Gallant eight years; Emmy Thorne, in charge of contacts and promotion, been with him four

years; and Carl Drew, business manager, been with him five years. None of them killed Bianca Voss at half-past eleven.

"From eleven fifteen on, until he call came from a man who said he was John H. Watson, Carl Drew was down on the main floor, constantly in view of four people, two of them customers. From eleven o'clock on Anita Prince was on the top floor, the workshop, with Alec Gallant and two models and a dozen employees. At eleven twenty Emily Thorne called on a man by appointment at his office on forty-sixth Street, and was with him and two other men until a quarter to twelve. And Flora Gallant was here with you. All right."

"Very neat," Wolfe agreed.

"Yeah. Too damn neat. Of course there may be others who wanted Bianca Voss out of the way, but as it stands now those four are out in front. And they're in—"

"Why not five? Alec Gallant himself?"

"All right, five. They're all in the clear, including him, if she was killed at eleven thirty. So suppose she wasn't. Suppose she was killed earlier, half an hour or so earlier. Suppose when Flora Gallant phoned her from here and it was you on to talk with her, it wasn't her at all, it was someone else imitating her voice, and she

pulled that stunt, the groan and the other noises, to make you think you had heard the murder at that time."

Wolfe's brows were up. "With the corpse there on the floor."

"Certainly."

"Then you're not much better off. Who did the impersonation? Their alibis still hold for eleven thirty."

"I realize that. But there were nineteen women around there altogether, and a woman who wouldn't commit a murder might be willing to help cover up after it had been committed. You know that."

Wolfe wasn't impressed. "It's very tricky, Mr. Cramer. If you are supposing Flora Gallant killed her, it was elaborately planned. Miss Gallant phoned here yesterday morning to make an appointment for eleven this morning. Did she kill Miss Voss, station someone there beside the corpse to answer the phone, rush down here, and maneuver me into ringing Miss Voss's number? It seems a little far-fetched."

"I didn't say it was Flora Gallant." Cramer hung on. "It could have been any of them. He or she didn't have to know you were going to ring that number. He might have intended to call it himself, before witnesses, to establish the time of the murder, and when your call came, whoever it was there by the phone

got rattled and went ahead with the act. There are a dozen different ways it could have happened. Hell, I know it's tricky. I'm not asking you to work your brain on it. You must know why I brought it up."

Wolfe nodded. "Yes, I think I do. You want me to consider what I heard—and Mr. Goodwin. You want to know if we are satisfied that those sounds were authentic. You want to know if we will concede that they might have been bogus."

"That's it. Exactly."

Wolfe rubbed his nose with a knuckle, closing his eyes. In a moment he opened them. "I'm afraid I can't help you, Mr. Cramer. If they were bogus they were well executed. At the time, hearing them, I had no suspicion that it was flummery. Naturally, as soon as I learned that they served to fix the precise moment of a murder, I knew they were open to question, but I can't challenge them intrinsically. Archie?"

I shook my head. "I pass." To Cramer: "You've read the statement, so you know that right after I heard it my guess was that something hit her and she dragged the phone along as she went down and it struck the floor. I'm not going to go back on my guess now. As for our not hearing the blow, read the statement. It says that it started out as if it

was going to be a scream but then it was a groan. She might have seen the blow coming and was going to scream, but it landed and turned it into a groan, and in that case we wouldn't hear the blow. A chunk of marble hitting a skull wouldn't make much noise. As for supposing she was killed half an hour or so earlier I phoned within three minutes or John H. Watson did, and in another six or seven minutes Car Drew was talking to me, so he must have seen the body, or someone did, not more than five minutes after we heard the groan. Was she twitching?"

"No. You don't twitch long with a scarf as tight as that around your throat."

"What about the Medical Examiner?"

"He got there a little after twelve. With blood he might have timed it pretty close, but there wasn't any. That's out."

"What about the setup? Someone left that room quick after we heard the sounds. If it was the murderer, he or she had to cradle the phone and tie the scarf but that wouldn't take long. If it was a fill-in, as you want to suppose, all she had to do was cradle the phone. Whichever way, wasn't there anyone else around?"

"No. If there was, they're saying it. As you know, Bianca Voel wasn't popular around there

Anyway, that place is a mess, with three different elevators, one in the store, one at the back for services and deliveries, and one in an outside hall with a separate entrance so they can go up to the offices without going through the store."

"That makes it nice. Then it's wide-open."

"As wide as a barn door." Cramer stood up. To Wolfe: "So that's the best you can do. You thought the sounds were open to question."

"Not intrinsically. Circumstantially, of course."

"Yeah. Much obliged." He was going. After two steps he turned. "I don't like gags about homicide—murder is no joke; but I can mention that Bianca Voss had you wrong. Scum. Stinking sewer. Orchids don't smell." He went.

Apparently he hadn't really swallowed it that she was already dead when we heard the sounds.

The next morning, Wednesday, eating breakfast in the kitchen with *The Times* propped up in front of me, which is routine, of course, I read the account of the Bianca Voss murder. There were various details that were news to me, but nothing startling or even helpful. It included the phone call from John H. Watson, but didn't add that he had been identified as Archie Goodwin, and there was

no mention of Nero Wolfe. I admit that the cops and the D.A. have a right to save something for themselves, but it never hurts to have your name in the paper, and I had a notion to phone Lon Cohen at the *Gazette* and give him an exclusive. However, I would have to mention it to Wolfe first, so it would have to wait until eleven o'clock.

As a matter of fact, another item in *The Times* came closer to me. Sarah Yare had committed suicide. Her body had been found Tuesday evening in her little walkup apartment on East Thirteenth Street. I had never written a fan letter to an actress, but I had been tempted to a couple of years back when I had seen Sarah Yare in *Thumb a Ride*. The first time I saw it I had a companion, but the next three times I was alone. The reason for repeating was that I had the impression I was infatuated and I wanted to wear it down, but when the impression still stuck after three tries I quit. Actresses should be seen and heard, but not touched. At that, I might have given the impression another test in a year or two if there had been an opportunity, but there wasn't. She quit *Thumb a Ride* abruptly some months later, and the talk was that she was an alco and done for.

So I read that item twice. It didn't say that it had been pro-

nounced suicide officially and finally, since she had left no note, but a nearly empty bourbon bottle had been there on a table, and on the floor by the couch that she had died on there had been a glass with enough left in it to identify the cyanide. The picture of her was as she had been when I had got my impression. I asked Fritz if he had ever seen Sarah Yare, and he asked what movies she had been in, and I said none, she was much too good for a movie.

I didn't get to suggest phoning Lon Cohen to Wolfe because when he came down from the plant rooms at eleven o'clock I wasn't there. As I was finishing my second cup of coffee a phone call came from the District Attorney's office inviting me to drop in, and I went and spent a couple of hours at Leonard Street with an Assistant D.A. named Brill.

When we got through I knew slightly more than I had when we started, but he didn't. He had a copy of our statement on his desk, and what could I add to that? He had a lot of fun, though. He would pop a question at me and then spend nine minutes studying the statement to see if I had tripped.

Getting home a little before noon, I was prepared to find Wolfe grumpy. He likes me to be there when he comes down from the plant rooms to the office,

and while he can't very well complain when the D.A. calls me or business that concerns us, this wasn't our affair. We had no client and no case and no fee in prospect. But I got a surprise. He wasn't grumpy; he was busy. He had the phone book open before him on his desk. He had actually gone to my desk, stooped to get the book, lifted it, and carried it around to his chair. Unheard of.

"Good morning," I said. "What's the emergency?"

"No emergency. I needed to know a number."

"Can I help?"

"Yes. I have instructions."

I sat. He wants you at his levee because it's too much trouble to tilt his head back. "Nothing new," I said, "at the D.A.'s office. Do you want a report?"

"No. You will go to Ale Gallant's place on Fifty-fourth Street and speak with Mr. Gallant, his sister, Miss Prince, Miss Thorne, and Mr. Drew. Separately if possible. You will tell each of them—you read *The Times* this morning as usual?"

"Certainly."

"You will tell each of them that I have engaged to make certain inquiries about Miss Sarah Yare, and that I shall be grateful for any information they may be able and willing to furnish. I would like to see any communications they may have

received from her—say, in the past month. Don't raise one brow like that. You know it disconcerts me."

"I've never seen you disconcerted yet." I let the brow down a little. "If they ask me who engaged you what do I say?"

"That you don't know. You are merely following instructions."

"If I ask you who engaged you what do you say?"

"I tell you the truth. No one. Or more accurately, I have engaged myself. I think I may have been hoodwinked and I intend to find out. You may be fishing where there are no fish. They may all say they have never had any association with Sarah Yare, and they may be telling the truth or they may not. You will have that in mind and form your conclusions. If any of them acknowledges association with her, pursue it enough to learn the degree of intimacy, but don't labor it. That can wait until we bait a hook. You are only to discover if there are any fish."

"Now?"

"Yes. The sooner the better."

I stood up. "It may take a while if the cops and the D.A. are working on them, and they probably are. How urgent is it? Do you want progress reports by phone?"

"Not unless you think it necessary. You must get all five of them."

"Right. Don't wait dinner for me." I went.

On the way uptown in the taxi I was using my brain. I will not explain at this point why Wolfe wanted to know if any of the subjects had known Sarah Yare, and if so how well, for two reasons: first, you have certainly spotted it yourself; and second, since I am not as smart as you are, I had not yet come up with the answer. It was underneath. On top, what I was using my brain for, was the phone book. Unquestionably it was connected with his being hoodwinked, since that was what was biting him, and therefore it probably had some bearing on the call that had been made from his office to Bianca Voss, but what could he accomplish by consulting the phone book? For that I had no decent guess, let alone an answer, by the time I paid the hackie at Fifty-fourth and Fifth Avenue.

Alec Gallant, Incorporated, on the north side of the street near Madison Avenue, was no palace, either outside or in. The front was maybe thirty feet, and five feet of that was taken by the separate entrance to the side hall. The show window, all dark green, had just one exhibit: a couple of yards of plain black fabric, silk or rayon or nylon or Orlon or Dacron or cottonon or linenon, draped on a little rack.

Inside, nothing whatever was

in sight—that is, nothing to buy. The wall-to-wall carpet was the same dark green as the show window. There were mirrors and screens and tables and ashtrays and a dozen or more chairs, not fancy, more to sit in than to look at. I had taken three steps on the carpet when a woman standing with a man by a table left him to come to meet me. I told her my name and said I would like to see Mr. Gallant. The man, approaching, spoke.

"Mr. Gallant is not available. What do you want?"

That didn't strike me as a very tactful greeting to a man who, for all he knew, might be set to pay \$800 for an afternoon frock, but of course he had had a tough twenty-four hours, so I kept it pleasant. "I'm not a reporter," I assured him, "or a cop, or a lawyer drumming up trade. I'm a private detective named Archie Goodwin, sent by a private detective named Nero Wolfe to ask Mr. Gallant a couple of harmless questions—not connected with the death of Bianca Voss."

"Mr. Gallant is not available."

I hadn't heard his voice in person before, only on the phone, but I recognized it. Also he looked like a business manager, with his neat well-arranged face, his neat well-made dark suit, and his neat shadow-stripe four-in-hand. He was a little puffy around the eyes, but the city and county employees

had probably kept him from getting much sleep.

"May I ask," I asked, "if you are Mr. Carl Drew?"

"Yes. I am."

"Then I'm in luck. I was instructed to see five different people here—Mr. Gallant, Miss Gallant, Miss Prince, Miss Thorne, and Mr. Drew. Perhaps we could sit down?"

He ignored that. "See us about what?"

The woman had left us. She was in earshot if her hearing was good, but this was certainly no secret mission, with five of them on the list. "To get information," I told him, "if you have any, about a woman who died yesterday. Not Bianca Voss. Miss Sarah Yare."

"Oh." He blinked. "Yes. That was tragic. Information? What kind of information?"

"I don't exactly know." I was apologetic. "All I know is that someone has engaged Mr. Wolfe to make inquiries about her, and he sent me to ask you people if you had any messages or letters from her in the past month or so, and if so will you let him see them."

"Messages or letters?"

"Right."

"That seems a little—who engaged him?"

"I don't know." I was not permitting my face or voice to show that I had caught sight of a fish.

"If you have had messages or letters, and would like to know who wants to see them before you produce them, I suppose Mr. Wolfe would tell you. He would have to."

"I have no messages or letters."

I was disappointed. "None at all? I said the past month or so, but before that would help. Any time."

He shook his head. "I never have had any. I doubt if she ever wrote a letter—that is, to anyone here—or any messages, except phone messages. She always did everything by telephone. And for the past month, longer than that, more than a year, she hasn't been—uh—she hasn't been around."

"I know." I was sympathetic, and I meant it, though not for him. "Anyway, I don't think Mr. Wolfe would be interested in letters about clothes. I think it's personal letters he wants, and he thought you might have known her well enough personally to have some."

"Well, I haven't. I can't say I didn't know her personally—she was a very fine customer here for two years, and she was a very personal person. But I never had a personal letter from her."

I had to resist temptation. I had him talking, and there was no telling if or when I would get at the others. But Wolfe had said not to labor it, and I disobey

instructions only when I have reason to think I know more about it than he does, and at that moment I didn't even know why he had been consulting the phone book. So I didn't press. I thanked him and said I would appreciate it if he would tell me when Mr. Gallant would be available. He said he would find out, and left me, going to the rear and disappearing around the end of a screen, and soon I heard his voice, but too faint to get any words.

There was no other voice, so, being a detective, I figured it out that he was on a phone. That accomplished, I decided to detect whether the woman, who was seated at a table going through a portfolio, was either Anita Prince or Emmy Thorne. I voted no, arriving at it by a process so subtle and complicated that I won't go into it.

Drew reappeared, and I met him in the middle of the room. He said that Mr. Gallant was in his office with Miss Prince and could let me have five minutes. Another fish. Certainly Drew had told Gallant what my line was, and why did I rate even five seconds? As Drew led me to an elevator and entered with me, and pushed the button marked 2, I had to remember to look hopeful instead of smug.

The second-floor hall was narrow, with bare walls, and not

carpeted. As I said, not a palace. After following Drew down six paces and through a door, I found myself in a pin-up paradise. All available space on all four walls was covered with women, drawings and prints and photographs, both black-and-white and color, all sizes, and in one respect they were all alike: none of them had a stitch on. It hadn't occurred to me that a designer of women's clothes should understand female anatomy, but I admit it might help. The effect was so striking that it took me four or five seconds to focus on the man and woman seated at a table. By that time Drew had pronounced my name and gone.

Though the man and woman were fully clothed, they were striking too. He reminded me of someone, but I didn't remember who until later: Lord Byron—a picture of Lord Byron in a book in my father's library that had impressed me at an early age. It was chiefly Gallant's dark curly hair backing up a wide sweeping forehead, but the nose and chin were in it too. The necktie was all wrong; instead of Byron's choker he was sporting a narrow ribbon tied in a bow with long ends hanging.

The woman didn't go with him. She was small and trim, in a tailored suit that had been fitted by an expert, and her face was all eyes. Not that they popped,

but they ran the show. In spite of Alec Gallant's lordly presence, as I approached the table I found myself aiming at Anita Prince's eyes.

Gallant was speaking. "What's this? About Sarah Yare?"

"Just a couple of questions." He had eyes too, when you looked at them. "It shouldn't take even five minutes. I suppose Mr. Drew told you?"

"He said Nero Wolfe is making an inquiry and sent you. What about? How she died?"

"I don't think so, but I'm not sure. The fact is, Mr. Gallant, on this I'm just an errand boy. My instructions were to ask if you got any messages or letters from her in the past month or so, and if so will you let Mr. Wolfe see them."

"My God." He closed his eyes, tilted his head back, and shook it—a lion pestered by a fly. He looked at the woman. "This is too much. Too much!" He looked at me. "You must know a woman was assassinated here yesterday. Of course you do!" He pointed at the door. "There!" His hand dropped to the desk like a dead bird. "And after that calamity, now this, the death of my old and valued friend. Miss Yare was not only my friend; in mold and frame she was perfection, in movement she was music, as a mannequin she would have been divine. My delight in her was com-

pletely pure. I never had a letter from her." His head jerked to Anita Prince. "Send him away," he muttered.

She put fingers on his arm. "You gave him five minutes, Alec, and he has only had two." Her voice was smooth and sure. The eyes came to me. "So you don't know the purpose of Mr. Wolfe's inquiry?"

"No, Miss Prince, I don't. He only tells me what he thinks I need to know."

"Nor who hired him to make it?"

So Drew had covered the ground. "No. Not that either. He'll probably tell you, if you have what he wants, letters from her, and you want to know why he wants to see them."

"I have no letters from her. I never had any. I had no personal relations with Miss Yare." Her lips smiled, but the eyes didn't. "Though I saw her many times, my contact with her was never close. Mr. Gallant preferred to fit her himself. I just looked on. It seems—" She stopped for a word, and found it. "It seems odd that Nero Wolfe should be starting an inquiry immediately after her death. Or did he start it before?"

"I couldn't say. The first I knew, he gave me this errand this noon."

"You don't know much, do you?"

"No, I just take orders."

"Of course you do know that Miss Yare committed suicide?"

I didn't get an answer in. Gallant, hitting the table with a palm, suddenly shouted at her, "Name of God! Must you? Send him away!"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Gallant," I told him. "I guess my time's up. If you'll tell me where to find your sister and Miss Thorne, that will—"

I stopped because his hand had darted to an ashtray, a big metal one that looked heavy, and since he wasn't smoking he was presumably going to let fly with it. Anita Prince beat him to it. With her left hand she got his wrist, and with her right she got the ashtray and moved it out of reach. It was very quick and deft. Then she spoke, to me. "Miss Gallant is not here. Miss Thorne is busy, but you can ask Mr. Drew downstairs. You had better go."

I went. In more favorable circumstances I might have spared another five minutes for a survey of the pinups, but not then, not if I had to dodge ashtrays.

In the hall, having pulled the door shut, the indicated procedure, indicated both by the situation and by Miss Prince's suggestion, was to take the elevator down and see Drew again, but a detective is supposed to have initiative. So when I heard a

voice, female, floating out through an open door, I went on past the elevator to the door, for a look. Not only did I see, I was seen, and a voice, anything but female, came at me.

"You. Huh?"

I could have kicked myself. While, as I said, my mission couldn't be called secret with five people on the list, certainly Wolfe had intended it to be private, and there was Sergeant Purley Stebbins of Homicide West, glaring at me.

"Sightseeing?" he asked. Purley's idea of humor is a little primitive. "The scene of the crime?"

I descended to his level. "Just morbid," I told him, crossing the sill. "Compulsion neurosis. Is this it?"

Evidently it was. The room was about the same size as Alec Gallant's, but while his had been dominated by women without clothes, this one ran to clothes without women. There were coats, suits, dresses, everything. They were on dummies, scattered around; on hangers, strung on a pole along a wall; and piled on a table. At my right one dummy, wearing a skirt, was bare from the waist up; she might have blushed if she had had a face to blush with.

There was one exception: a well-made tan wool dress standing by a corner of a desk contained

a woman—a very attractive specimen in mold and frame, and in movement she could have been music. Standing beside her was Carl Drew. Seated at the desk was Sergeant Purley Stebbins, with a paper in his hand and other papers on the desk. Also on the desk, at his left, was a telephone—the one, presumably, that Wolfe and I had heard hit the floor.

What I had stumbled into was obvious. Purley was examining the effects, including papers, probably the second time over, of Bianca Voss, deceased, under surveillance on behalf of Alec Gallant, Incorporated.

"Actually," I said, advancing past the immodest dummy, "this is one homicide I have no finger in. I'm on a fishing trip." I moved my eyes. "Would you tell me, Mr. Drew, where I can find Miss Thorne?"

"Right here," the tan wool dress said. "I am Miss Thorne."

"I'm Archie Goodwin of Nero Wolfe's office. May I have a word with you?"

She exchanged glances with Carl Drew. Her glance told me that Drew had told her about me; and his, if I am half as bright as I ought to be, told me that if he was not on a more personal basis with her than he had been with Sarah Yare it wasn't his fault. If he wasn't he would like to be.

"Go ahead," Drew told her. "I'll stick around." She moved toward the door, and I was following when Purley pronounced my name, my last name. He has on occasion called me Archie, but not when I suddenly appeared, uninvited, when he was working on a homicide. I turned.

"Who are you fishing for?" he demanded.

"If I knew," I said, "I might tell you, but don't hold your breath." There was no point in trying to sugar him. The damage, if any, had been done the second he saw me. "See you in court."

Emmy Thorne led me down the hall to a door, the next one, and opened it. Walking, she could have been music at that, if her heels had had any purchase. She held the door for me to enter, shut it, went to a chair behind a desk, and sat. The room was less than half the size of the others and displayed neither women nor clothes.

"Sit down," she said. "What is this nonsense about letters from Sarah Yare?"

I took the chair at the end of her desk. "You know," I said, "my tie must be crooked or I've got a grease spot. Mr. Drew resented me, and Mr. Gallant was going to throw an ashtray at me. Now you. Why is it nonsense to ask a simple question politely and respectfully?"

"Maybe 'nonsense' isn't the

word. Maybe I should have said 'gall.' What right have you to march in here and ask questions at all? Polite or not."

"None. It's not a right, it's a liberty. I have no right to ask you to have dinner with me this evening, which might not be a bad idea, but I'm at liberty to, and you're at liberty to tell me you'd rather dine at the automat with a baboon, only that wouldn't be very polite. Also when I ask if you have any letters from Sarah Yare you're at liberty to tell me to go climb a tree if you find the question ticklish. I might add that I would be at liberty to climb a pole instead of a tree. Have you any letters from Sarah Yare?"

She laughed. She had fine teeth. She stopped laughing abruptly. "Good Lord," she said, "I didn't think I would laugh for a year. This mess, what happened here yesterday, and then Sarah. No, I have no letters from her. You don't have to climb a tree." The laughter was all gone, and her gray eyes, straight at me, were cool and keen. "What else?"

Again I had to resist temptation. With Drew the temptation had been purely professional; with her it was only partly professional and only partly pure. Cramer had said she was in charge of contacts, and one more might be good for her.

Having resisted, I shook my head. "Nothing else, unless you

know of something. For instance, if you know of anyone who might have letters."

"I don't." She regarded me. "Of course I'm curious, if you want to call it that. I was very fond of Sarah, and this coming after all her trouble, naturally I'm wondering why you came here. You say Nero Wolfe is making an inquiry?"

"Yes, he sent me. I don't know who his client is, but my guess would be that it's some friend of Miss Yare's." I stood. "Someone else may be curious. Thank you, Miss Thorne. I'm glad I don't have to climb a tree."

She got up and offered a hand. "You might tell me who it is."

"I might if I knew." Her hand was cool and firm and I kept it for a second. "I'm sorry I interrupted you in there." That was absolutely true. "By the way, one more liberty: is Miss Gallant around?"

She said no and came with me to the hall and left me, heading for the scene of the crime. I went the other way, to the elevator. Down on the main floor the woman was there alone, at a table with a portfolio. Not at all like Macy's main floor. Emerging, I turned left, found a phone booth on Madison Avenue, dialed the number I knew best, got Fritz, and asked for Wolfe.

His voice came. "Yes, Archie?"

"It's full of fish. Swarming.

Sarah Yare bought her clothes there for two years and they all loved her. I'm phoning to ask about Flora Gallant. I've seen all the others, but Flora isn't around. My guess is that she's in the D.A.'s office. Do I stick until she comes?"

"No. Satisfactory."

"Any further instructions?"

"No. Come home."

In the office, after a late lunch of corned-beef hash with mushrooms, chicken livers, white wine, and grated cheese, which Fritz apologized for because he had had to keep it warm too long, I gave Wolfe a full report of the fishing trip, including all dialogue. When I had finished he nodded, took in air through his nose all the way down, and let it out through his mouth.

"Very well," he said, "that settles it. You will now go—"

"Just a minute," I cut in. "It doesn't settle it for me. It was bad enough up there, not knowing the score, and before I do any more going I want a little light. Why did you pick on Sarah Yare, and where did the phone book come in?"

"I have an errand for you."

"Yeah. Will it keep for ten minutes?"

"I suppose so."

"Then why?"

He leaned back. "As I told you this morning, I thought I

might have been hoodwinked and I intended to find out. It was quite possible that that performance here yesterday—getting us on the phone just in time to hear a murder committed—was flummery. Indeed, it was more than possible. Must I expound that?”

“No. Even Cramer suspected it.”

“So he did. But his theory that Bianca Voss had been killed earlier and that another woman, not the murderer, was there beside the corpse waiting for a phone call was patently ridiculous. Must I expound that?”

“No, unless it was a lunatic. Anyone who would do that, even the murderer, with the chance that someone might come in any second, would be batty.”

“Of course. But if she wasn’t killed at the time we heard those sounds she must have been killed earlier, since you phoned almost immediately and sent someone to that room. Therefore the sounds didn’t come from there. Miss Gallant did not dial that number. She dialed the number of some other person whom she had persuaded to perform that hocus-pocus.”

He turned a hand over. “I had come to that conclusion, or call it surmise, before I went to bed last night, and I had found it intolerable. I will not be mistaken for a jackass. Reading *The Times* at breakfast this morning, the item

about the death of Sarah Yare, my attention was caught by the fact that she had been an actress. An actress can act a part. Also she had been in distress. Also she had died. If she had been persuaded to act *that* part, it would be extremely convenient—for the one who persuaded her—for her to die before she learned that a murder had been committed and she had been an accessory after the fact. Certainly that was mere speculation, but it was not idle, and when I came down to the office I looked in the phone book to see if Sarah Yare was listed, found that she was, and dialed her number. Algonquin nine, one-eight-four-seven.”

“What for? She was dead.”

“I didn’t lift the receiver. I merely dialed it, to hear it. Before doing so I strained my memory. I had to recall an experience that was filed somewhere in my brain, having reached it through my ears. As you know, I am trained to attend, to observe, and to register. So are you. That same experience is filed in your brain. Close your eyes and find it. Take your ears back to yesterday, when you were standing there, having surrendered your chair to Miss Gallant, and she was at the phone, dialing. Not the first number she dialed; you dialed that one yourself later. The second one, when, according to her, she was dialing the number

of the direct line to Bianca Voss's office. Close your eyes and let your ears and brain take you back. Insist on it."

I did so. I got up and stood where I had stood while she was dialing, shut my eyes, and brought it back. In ten seconds I said, "Okay."

"Keep your eyes closed. I'm going to dial it. Compare."

The sound came of his dialing. I held my breath till the end, then opened my eyes and said positively, "No. Wrong. The first and third and fourth were wrong. The second might—"

"Close your eyes and try it again. This will be another number. Say when."

I shut my eyes and took five seconds. "Go."

The dialing sound came, the seven units. I opened my eyes. "That's more like it. That was it, anyway the first four. Beyond that I'm a little lost. But in that case—"

"Satisfactory. The first four were enough. The first number, which you rejected, as I did this morning, was Plaza two, nine-oh-two-two, the number of Bianca Voss's direct line according to the phone book—the number which Miss Gallant pretended to be dialing. The second was Sarah Yare's number, Algonquin nine, one-eight-four-seven."

"Well." I sat down. "I'll be damned."

"So it was still a plausible surmise, somewhat strengthened, but no more than that. If those people, especially Miss Gallant, could not be shown to have had some association with Sarah Yare, it was untenable. So I sent you to explore, and what you found promoted the surmise to an assumption, and a weighty one. What time is it?"

He would have had to twist his neck a whole quarter turn to look at the wall clock, whereas I had only to lower my eyes to see my wrist. I obliged. "Five to four."

"Then instructions for your errand must be brief, and they can be. You will go to Sarah Yare's address on Thirteenth Street and look at her apartment. Her phone might have been discontinued since that book was issued. I need to know that the instrument is still there and operable before I proceed. If I intend to see that whoever tried to make a fool of me regrets it, I must take care not to make a fool of myself. Have I furnished the light you wanted?"

I told him it was at least a glimmer and departed on the errand. If you think I might have shown fuller appreciation of his dialing display, I beg to differ. There is no point in assuring a man that he is a genius when he already knows it. Besides, I was too busy being sore at me.

I should have thought of it myself. I certainly should have caught on when I saw him with the phone book.

It was not my day. At the address of the late Sarah Yare on East Thirteenth Street I stubbed my toe again. One thing I think I'm good at is sizing up people, and I was dead wrong about the janitor of that old walkup. He looked as if anything would go, so I merely told him to let me into Sarah Yare's apartment to check the telephone, and the bum insisted on seeing my credentials. So I misjudged him again. I offered him a sawbuck and told him I only wanted two minutes for a look at the phone with him at my elbow, and when he turned me down I showed him a twenty. He just sneered at it. By that time we were bitter enemies, and if I had showed him a C he would probably have spit on it.

The upshot was that I went back home for an assortment of keys, returned, posted myself across the street, waited nearly an hour to be sure the enemy was not peeking, and broke and entered, technically.

I won't describe it; it was too painful. It was a hell of a dump for a Sarah Yare, even for a down-and-outer who had once been Sarah Yare. But the telephone was there, and it was working. I dialed to make sure, and got Fritz, and told him I

just wanted to say hello and would be home in fifteen minutes, and he said that would please Mr. Wolfe because Inspector Cramer was there.

"No," I said.

"Yes," he said.

"When did he come?"

"Ten minutes ago. At six o'clock. Mr. Wolfe said to admit him and is with him in the office. Hurry home, Archie."

I did so.

I got a hackie who liked to take advantages, and it took a little less than the fifteen minutes. I ascended the stoop and let myself in, not banging the door, and tiptoed down the hall and stopped short of the office door, thinking to get a sniff of the atmosphere before entering. I got it. Wolfe's voice came.

"...and I didn't say I have never known you to be wrong, Mr. Cramer. I said I have never known you to be more wrong. That is putting it charitably, under provocation. You have accused me of duplicity. Pfui!"

"Nuts." Cramer had worked up to his grittiest rasp. "I have accused you of nothing. I have merely stated facts. The time of the murder was supposed to be established by you and Goodwin hearing it on the phone. Is that a fact? Those five people all have alibis for that time. One of them was here with you. Is that a fact? When I put it to you yesterday

that that phone business might have been faked, that she might have been killed earlier, all I got was a runaround. You could challenge it circumstantially but not intrinsically, whatever the hell that means. Is that a fact? So that if you and Goodwin got to the witness stand you might both swear that you were absolutely satisfied that you had heard her get it at exactly half-past eleven. Is that a fact? Giving me to understand that you weren't interested, you weren't concerned, you had no—"

"No," Wolfe objected. "That was not broached."

"Nuts. You know damn well it was implied. You said you had never had any association with any of those people besides what was in your statement, so how could you be concerned, with Bianca Voss dead? Tell me this, did any of them approach you, directly or indirectly, between seven o'clock yesterday and noon today?"

"No."

"But—" He bore down on the "but." "*But* you sent Goodwin there today. He told Stebbins he was on a fishing trip. He talked with Drew, and Gallant, and Miss Prince, and he actually took Miss Thorne from under Stebbins' nose, took her out to talk with her. Is that a fact? And they all refused to tell what Goodwin said to them or what they said to him.

That *is* a fact. They say it was a private matter and had nothing to do with the murder of Bianca Voss. And when I come and ask you what you sent Goodwin there for, ask you plainly and politely, you say that you will—what are you laughing at?"

It wasn't a laugh, I just barely caught it—it was hardly even a chuckle; but all the same it could get under your skin. I knew.

"It escaped me, Mr. Cramer. Your choice of adverbs. Your conception of politeness. Pray continue."

"All right, I asked you. And you said you will probably be ready to tell me within twenty-four hours. And what I said was absolutely justified. I did not accuse you of duplicity. You know what I said."

"I do indeed, Mr. Cramer." I couldn't see Wolfe, but I knew he had upturned a palm. "This is childish and futile. If a connection is established between your murder investigation and the topic of Mr. Goodwin's talks with those people today, it will be only because I formed a conjecture and acted on it. I hope to establish it within twenty-four hours, and meanwhile it will do no harm to give you a hint. Have you any information on the death of a woman named Sarah Yare?"

"Some, yes. Presumed a suicide, but being checked. I have two men on it. What about it?"

"I suggest that you assign more men to it, good ones, and explore it thoroughly. I think we will both find it helpful. I may soon have a more concrete suggestion, but for the present that should serve. You know quite well—"

The doorbell rang. I about-faced and looked through the one-way glass panel of the front door. It wasn't a visitor on the stoop, it was a mob. All five of them were there: Gallant, his sister, Anita Prince, Emmy Thorne, and Carl Drew. Fritz appeared from the kitchen, saw me, and stopped. I got my notebook and pen from pockets and wrote:

That phone works. The five subjects are outside wanting in.

AG

I told Fritz to stand by, tore out the sheet, entered the office and crossed to Wolfe's desk, and handed it to him.

Wolfe read it, frowned at it for three seconds, turned his head and called, "Fritz!"

Fritz appeared at the door. "Yes, sir?"

"Put the chain-bolt on and tell those people they will be admitted shortly. Stay there."

"Yes, sir." Fritz went.

Wolfe looked at Cramer. "Mr. Gallant, his sister, Miss Prince, Miss Thorne, and Mr. Drew have arrived, uninvited and unexpected. You'll have to leave without being

seen. In the front room until they have entered. I'll communicate with you later."

"Like hell I'll leave." Cramer was on his feet. "Like hell they're unexpected." He was moving toward the hall, his intention plain—taking over as receptionist.

"Mr. Cramer!" It snapped at his back, turning him. "Would I lie so clumsily? If they had been expected would I have let you in? Would I have sat here bickering with you? Either you leave or I do. If you admit them you'll have them to yourself, and I wish you luck."

Cramer was glaring. "You think I'm going to sneak out and sit on your damn stoop until you whistle?"

"That *would* be unseemly," Wolfe conceded. "Very well." He pointed at a picture on the wall to his left behind him—a pretty waterfall. "You know about that. You may take that station, but only if you engage not to disclose yourself unless you are invited. Unequivocally."

The waterfall covered a hole in the wall. On the other side, in a wing of the hall across from the kitchen, the hole was covered by nothing, and you could not only see through but also hear through. Cramer had used it once before, a couple of years ago.

Cramer stood, considering. Wolfe demanded, "Well? They're waiting. For you or for me?"

Cramer said, "Okay, we'll try it your way," turned and marched to the hall, and turned left.

Wolfe told me, "All right, Archie. Bring them in."

Lord Byron, alias Alec Gallant, and the red leather chair went together fine. He sat well back, unlike most people I have seen there. Usually they are either too mad or too upset. Any of the other four probably would have been; they looked it. They were on yellow chairs that I had moved up to make a row facing Wolfe, with Emmy Thorne nearest me, then Anita Prince, then Carl Drew, then Flora Gallant. That put Flora nearest her brother, which seemed appropriate.

Wolfe was turned to Gallant. "You ask me, sir, why I sent Mr. Goodwin to ask you people about Sarah Yare. Of course I'm under no compulsion to reply, and I'm not sure that I am prepared to. Instead, I may ask why his questions, certainly not provocative, so disturbed you. Apparently they have even impelled you to call on me in a body. Why?"

"Talk," Gallant said. "*Vent.* Wind." There was an ashtray on the little table at his elbow, but not a heavy one.

Anita Prince put in, "The police have insisted on knowing why he was there, what he wanted."

Wolfe nodded. "And you refused to say. Why?"

"Because," Emmy Thorne declared, "it was none of their business. And we have a right to know why you sent him, whether his questions were provocative or not." That girl was strong on rights.

Wolfe's eyes went from right to left and back again. "There's no point," he said, "in dragging this out. I'll grant your question priority and we'll go on from there. I sent Mr. Goodwin to see you because I suspected I had been gulled and wanted to find out; and further, because I had guessed that there was a connection between Sarah Yare, and her death, and the murder of Bianca Voss. By coming here en masse you have made that guess a conviction, if any doubt had remained."

"I knew it," Flora Gallant mumbled.

"*Tais-toi*," her brother commanded her. To Wolfe: "I'll tell you why we came here. We came for an explanation. We came—"

"For an understanding," Carl Drew cut in. "We're in trouble, all of us, you know that, and we need your help, and we're ready to pay for it. First we have to know what the connection is between Sarah Yare and what happened to Bianca Voss."

Wolfe shook his head. "You don't mean that. You mean you

have to know whether I have established the connection, and if so, how. I'm willing to tell you, but before I do so I must clarify matters. There must be no misunderstanding. For instance, I understand that all of you thought yourselves gravely endangered by Miss Voss's presence. You, Miss Prince, you, Miss. Thorne, and you, Mr. Drew—your dearest ambitions were threatened. Your future was committed to the success and glory of that enterprise, and you were convinced that Miss Voss was going to cheapen it, and perhaps destroy it. Do you challenge that?"

"Of course not." Emmy Thorne was scornful. "Everybody knew it."

"Then that's understood. That applies equally to you, Miss Gallant, but with special emphasis. You also had a more intimate concern, for your brother. You told me so. As for you, Mr. Gallant, you are not a man to truckle, yet you let that woman prevail. Presumably you were under severe constraint. Were you?"

Gallant opened his mouth and closed it. He looked at his sister, returned to Wolfe, and again opened his mouth and closed it. He was under constraint now, no doubt about that.

He forced it out. "I was under her heel." He clamped his jaw. He unclamped it. "The police

know. They found out enough, and I have told them the rest. She was a bad woman. I met her in France, during the war. We were in the Resistance together when I married her. Only afterward I learned that she was *perfidie*. She had been a traitor to France—I couldn't prove it, but I knew it. I left her and changed my name and came to America—and then last year she found me and made demands. I was under her heel."

Wolfe grunted. "That won't do, Mr. Gallant. I doubt if it has satisfied the police, and it certainly doesn't satisfy me. In that situation you might have killed her, but surely you wouldn't have let her take charge of your business and your life. What else was there?"

"Nothing. Nothing!"

"Pfui. Of course there was. And if the investigation is prolonged the police will discover it. I advise you to disclose it and let me get on and settle this affair. Didn't her death remove her heel?"

"Yes. Thank God it did." Gallant hit the arms of the chair with his palms. "With her gone there is no evidence to fear. She had two brothers, and they, like her, were traitors, and I killed them. I would have killed her too, but she escaped me. During the war it would have been merely an episode, but it was later, much

later, when I found out about them, and by then it was a crime. With her evidence I was an *assassin*, and I was doomed. Now she is gone, thank God, but I did not kill her. You know I did not. At half-past eleven yesterday morning I was in my workshop with Miss Prince and others, and you can swear that she was killed at that moment. That is why we came to see you, to arrange to pay—”

“Hold it, Alec.” Anita Prince headed him off. “Mr. Wolfe wants to clarify matters. Let him.”

“The cat’s head is out,” Wolfe told her, “but I had already heard it scratch. Let’s get on. I cannot swear that Bianca Voss was killed ‘at that moment.’ On the contrary, I’m sure she wasn’t, for a variety of reasons. There are such minor ones as the extraordinary billingsgate she spat at me on the phone, quite gratuitous; and her calling me a gob of fat. A woman who still spoke the language with so marked an accent would not have the word ‘gob’ so ready, and probably wouldn’t have it at all.”

He waved “gob” away. “But the major reasons are more cogent. In the first place, it was too pat. Since the complexities of nature permit a myriad of coincidences we cannot reject one offhand, but we can discriminate. That one—that the attack had come just at the moment when Miss Gallant had got Mr. Good-

win and me on the phone with her—was highly suspect. Besides, it was indiscreet to strike just then. Why not wait until she had hung up? Whoever was talking with her would certainly hear the sounds and take alarm. As I told Mr. Cramer, it was open to challenge circumstantially, though not intrinsically. However, there was another challenge, on surer ground. Miss Gallant did not dial Plaza two, nine-oh-two-two, Miss Voss’s number. She dialed Algonquin nine, one-eight-four-seven, Sarah Yare’s number.”

A noise, a sort of low growl, came from the waterfall. I was farthest away, and I heard it distinctly, so it must have reached their ears too, but Wolfe’s last words had so riveted their attention that it didn’t register.

It did with Wolfe, and he added hastily, “I didn’t know that yesterday. I became certain of it only after you rang my doorbell, when Mr. Goodwin handed me this note.” He tapped it, there on his desk. “Its first words are ‘That phone works.’ I had sent him to learn if Sarah Yare’s phone was in operation. Obviously, Miss Gallant had arranged with Miss Yare to impersonate Bianca Voss, and it is a reasonable—”

“Wait a minute.” Gallant had come forward in the red leather chair. “You can’t prove that.”

“Directly, no. Inferentially, yes.”

"And how do you know she dialed Sarah Yare's number? You weren't where you could see the dial, and neither was Goodwin."

Wolfe nodded. "Evidently you have discussed it with her. You're quite right, Mr. Gallant; we couldn't see the dial. Nevertheless, we can supply evidence, and we think it will be persuasive. I am not—"

"What kind of evidence?"

"That's no good, Alec." It was Emmy Thorne, the contact girl. "You can't push Nero Wolfe. He has his teeth in it, you can see that. You know what we decided."

"I'm not sure," Anita Prince objected, "that we decided right."

"I am. Carl?"

"Yes." Drew was chewing his lip. "I think so. Yes."

"Flora? It's up to you."

"I guess so." Flora's voice was cracked, and she tried again. "I guess so." A little better.

Emmy nodded. "Go ahead, Alec. You can't push him."

"My God." Gallant looked at his sister, and back at Wolfe. "All right. We will pay you to help us. I will pay you. My sister is innocent and she must not suffer. It would be an offense against nature, against God Himself. She has told me all about it, and she was stupid, but she is innocent. She did arrange with Sarah Yare, as you said, but only to move you. She had read much about

you and had a great opinion of your abilities. She was desperate about Bianca Voss. She knew you demanded high fees, much beyond her resources, so she conceived a plan. She would persuade you to talk with Bianca Voss on the phone, and she would get Sarah instead, and Sarah would abuse you with such violence that you would be offended and resent it, and you would be moved to act against Bianca Voss. It was stupid, yes, very stupid, but it was not criminal."

Wolfe's eyes, at him, were half closed. "And you want to pay me to help your sister?"

"Yes. When I told her you had sent your man to inquire about Sarah Yare I saw she was frightened and asked her why, and she told me. I consulted the others, and it was apparent that you knew something, and that was dangerous. We decided to come and ask you to help. My sister must not suffer."

Wolfe's eyes moved. "Miss Gallant. You heard your brother. Did he quote you correctly?"

"Yes!" That time it was too loud.

"You did those things? As he related them?"

"Yes!"

Wolfe returned to Gallant. "I agree with you, sir, that your sister was stupid, but you are not the one to proclaim it. You say that she arranged with Sarah Yare

to abuse me on the phone, but Miss Yare didn't stop at that. She ended by making noises indicating that she had been violently attacked, and jerked the phone off onto the floor, and made other noises, and then hung up the phone and cut the connection. Was that on her own initiative? Her own idea? Your sister's stupidity can bow to yours if you expected me to overlook that point—or worse, if you missed it yourself."

"I am not stupid, Mr. Wolfe."

"Then you are devious beyond my experience."

"Devious?"

"*Rusé. Subtil.*"

"No. I am not." Gallant clamped his jaw. He released it. "*Bien*. Suppose, only to suppose, she arranged that too, that comedy. Suppose even that she killed Bianca Voss. Was that a crime? No; it was justice; it was the hand of God. Bianca Voss was an evil woman. She was *vilaine*. Are you so virtuous that you must crucify my sister? Are you a paragon? For she is in your hands, at your mercy. You know about Sarah Yare, but the police do not. You know she dialed that number, but the police do not, and they will not unless you tell them. By your word it can be that my sister was here with you at the time that Bianca Voss was killed. As I have said, I will pay you. It will be a great service from you,

and it deserves payment. I will trust you. I will pay you now."

Wolfe grunted. "That was quite a speech."

"It was not a speech. I do not make speeches. It was an appeal to your charity. From my heart."

"And to my cupidity." Wolfe shook his head. "No. I am not a paragon. I am not even a steward of the law. But you have ignored two important factors: one, my self-esteem. Even if Bianca Voss deserved to die, I will not permit a murderer to take me for a simpleton. Two, another woman died too. Was Sarah Yare also evil? Was she *vilaine*?"

"But she — Sarah killed herself!"

"No. I don't believe it. That's another coincidence I reject. Granted that she may have been wretched enough for that extreme, why did she choose that particular moment? Again too pat. According to the published account she died between ten o'clock yesterday morning and two in the afternoon, but I can narrow it a little. Since she spoke with me on the phone at eleven thirty, she died between that hour and two o'clock. I believe that the person who killed Bianca Voss at some time prior to eleven thirty, and arranged with Sarah Yare to enact that comedy, as you call it, went to Sarah Yare's apartment later and killed her. Indeed, prudence

demanded it. So you ask too much of my charity. If only Bianca Voss had died—”

“No!” Gallant exploded. “Impossible! Totally impossible! My sister loved Sarah! She killed her? Insane!”

“But you believe she killed Bianca Voss. You came here believing that. That was stupid too. She didn’t.”

Gallant gawked at him. Lord Byron shouldn’t gawk, but he did. So did the others. Also they made noises. Carl Drew demanded, “Didn’t? You say she *didn’t*?” Emmy Thorne asked coolly, “What’s this, Mr. Wolfe? A game?”

“No, madam, not a game. Nor a comedy—Mr. Gallant’s word. As a man I know said yesterday, murder is no joke.” Wolfe’s eyes went to Flora. “There was much against you, Miss Gallant, especially the fact that you dialed that other number before you dialed Sarah Yare’s, and asked someone you called Doris if Miss Voss was around. Are you too rattled to remember that?”

“No.” She was clutching the rim of her bag with both hands. “I remember.”

“Of course the reason for it was obvious, if you had killed Bianca Voss before you came here; you had to know that the body had not been found before you proceeded with your stratagem. Since you had *not* kill-

ed Bianca Voss, why did you make that call?”

“I wanted to make sure that she hadn’t gone out. That she was there in her office. You might call her again after I left and find out she hadn’t been there. I didn’t care if you called her and she denied she had talked to you like that. I thought you would think she was lying. I suppose that was stupid.” Her mouth worked. “How did you know I didn’t kill her?”

“You told me. You showed me. If you had devised that elaborate humbug, certainly you would have decided how to act at the moment of crisis. You would have decided to be alarmed, and shocked, and even perhaps a little dazed. But it wasn’t like that. You were utterly stunned with bewilderment. When Mr. Goodwin told us what Mr. Drew had said, what did you say? You said, ‘But how—’ And repeated it, ‘But how—’ If you had killed Bianca Voss you would have had to be a master dramatist to write such a line, and an actress of genius to deliver it as you did; and you are neither.”

Wolfe waved it away. “But that was for me. For others, for a judge and jury, I must do better, and I think I can. If you are innocent, someone else is guilty. Someone else learned of the arrangement you had made with Sarah Yare, either from you or from her, and persuaded her to

add a dramatic climax. Someone else killed Bianca Voss and then established an invulnerable alibi for the crucial period. Someone else had secured the required amount of cyanide—it doesn't take much. Someone else, having established the alibi, went to Sarah Yare's apartment and poisoned her glass of whiskey. That was done before two o'clock, and that should make it simple. Indeed, it *has* made it simple.

"Shortly before you came I learned from Mr. Cramer of the police that you arrived at your brother's place yesterday a few minutes after noon. Since you left here at a quarter of twelve, you hadn't had time to go first to Thirteenth Street and dispose of Sarah Yare; and you were continuously under the eyes of policemen the rest of the afternoon. That is correct?"

"Yes." Flora's eyes were wet but she hadn't used a handkerchief. "I wanted to go and see what had happened to Sarah, but I was afraid—I didn't know—"

"It's a good thing you didn't, madam. I also learned from Mr. Cramer that you, Mr. Gallant, you, Mr. Drew, and you, Miss Prince, were also constantly under surveillance, for hours, from the time the police arrived. That leaves you, Miss Thorne." His eyes were narrowed at her. "You were with three men in an office

on Forty-sixth Street from eleven twenty until a quarter to twelve. You arrived at Mr. Gallant's place, and found the police there, shortly before three o'clock. You may be able to account for the interim satisfactorily. Do you want to try?"

"I don't have to try." Emmy Thorne's gray eyes were not as cool and keen as they had been when she had told me I didn't have to climb a tree. She had to blink to keep them at Wolfe. "So it is a game."

"Not one you'll enjoy, I fear. Nor will I; I'm out of it now. To disclose your acquisition of the cyanide you needed for Sarah Yare; to show that you entered Bianca Voss's room yesterday morning, or could have, before you left for your business appointment; to find evidence of your visit to Thirteenth Street after your business appointment; to decide which homicide you will be put on trial for—all that is for others. You must see now that it was a mistake—Archie!"

I was up and moving, but halted. Gallant, out of his chair and advancing, wasn't going to touch her. His fists were doubled, but not to swing; they were pressed against his chest. He stopped in front of her and commanded, "Look at me, Emmy."

To do so she would have had to move her head, tilt it back, and she moved nothing.

"I have loved you," he said. "Did you kill Sarah?"

Her lips moved but no sound came.

His fists opened for his fingers to spread on his chest. "So you heard us that day, and you knew I couldn't marry you because I was married to her, and you killed her. That I can understand, for I loved you. But that you killed Sarah, no. No! And even that is not the worst! Today, when I told you and the others what Flora had told me, you accepted it, you allowed us to accept it, that Flora had killed Bianca. You would have let her suffer for it. Look at me! You would have let my sister—"

Flora was there, tugging at his sleeve, sputtering. "You love her, Alec, don't hurt her now."

Gallant jerked loose, backed up, folded his arms, and breathed;

and Emmy Thorne moved. She came up out of her chair, stood rigid long enough to give Gallant a straight hard look, shook her head, spun away from him, and headed for the door, brushing against Flora. Her route took her past Anita Prince, who tilted her head back to look up at her, and past Carl Drew, who had to pull his feet back not to trip her.

I didn't budge, thinking I wasn't needed, and I was right. In movement she might have been music, but if so, the music stopped. As she made the hall and turned toward the front a hand gripped her arm—a hand that had had plenty of practice gripping arms.

"Take it easy, Miss Thorne," Cramer said. "We'll have to have a talk."

"*Grand Dieu*," Gallant groaned, and covered his face with his hand.



Our first impulse was to present Len Gray's "The Capers in Heather's Revenge" (no kidding, that's the title!) as one of our Department of Second Stories. Then we remembered that in our August 1969 issue we published Len Gray's two "first stories" because the author had submitted two "first stories" simultaneously. So, actually, we had already published Len Gray's second story, and his new one is really his third. (We do make simple things complicated, don't we?)

Len Gray's new story has the same easy readability, the same breezy affability, of his double debut in print. It's like a shaft of sunlight these too-often grim and gloomy days. Keep us chuckling, Mr. Gray!

THE CAPER IN HEATHER'S REVENGE

by LEN GRAY

I WAS SITTING IN THE run-down, second-class hotel room when the run-down, second-class maid came fumbling in. Without knocking.

She almost saw the binoculars. I slid them under the bed and sat back on my chair.

"Gotta change the linen." She should have retired around ten years ago; even her faded gray uniform looked ancient.

I pointed my finger at the door. "Out!"

"I can't. I've got to—"

"Listen," I said, "there's this open window and there's the door.

One way or the other you're leaving. Now!"

She wanted to argue. Her face was screwed up so tight I thought she might prefer the window. Finally she glared at me and marched out, slamming the door. I was rather surprised the whole building didn't collapse. Right on top of the rats in the cellar.

I retrieved my 7x35 Japanese glasses, pulled my chair closer to the window, and looked out.

The hotel was across the street from the main suburban shopping center of Heather's Revenge. I looked over the scenery carefully,

© 1970 by Len Gray.

making sure that some idle shopkeeper or disinterested citizen wasn't gazing at the hotel. Satisfied, I picked up the binoculars and focused on the bank.

It was a sturdy building of concrete-block construction. There were two sets of heavy glass doors, one at the front and one at the left side of the building. The bank was isolated from the rest of the center, sitting on the far left corner of the lot. There were two driveways, one near the bank and the other servicing a market located at the other end of the center.

As I sat in the chair staring through the binoculars I thought of Andy Tillman and wondered what he was doing.

Andy is a "spotter"—a guy who lines up jobs for the pros. He works on a ten percent commission, collectable after a successful haul. Realizing you can't collect from customers in jail, Andy is a careful swindler who rarely misses.

It was two weeks ago that I sat in his kitchen, listening to his information about Heather's Revenge.

"*Heather's Revenge*? Are you kidding?"

Andy smiled. "Weird name, isn't it? Evidently some tanked-up Joll got kicked out of town. Stewed about it a couple of days, then decided to come back and burn up the place. She had about

half the job done before they managed to water it down. When they built it back up, somebody suggested renaming the place after the doll. Pretty interesting, huh?"

"I'm fascinated."

"Yeah, I can tell. Well, anyhow, I heard about the bank the last time I was up north. Nobody's ever scored on it. Kind of figures though. Only about five thousand people in the whole town. And it's not the only bank."

"Sounds like a job for some punk."

Andy grinned and sucked on his cigarette. "Wrongo! On alternate Fridays they have a minimum of two hundred big ones on hand. Casheroo."

"How come?"

"Payroll. The president of the bank, a guy named Mitchell, is the best buddy of Sol Springer. Ol' Sol has factories, mines, and untold treasures scattered all over the Northwest. Sol insists that Mitchell handle all his money. I insist that *you* handle it for him."

"Okay," I said. "Sounds good. What's the physical setup?"

"Concrete, time vault, but the money is out waiting for an escorted pickup at three thirty. Place usually shuts up around three."

"Usually? What's usually?"

"Well, sometimes the place shuts up a few minutes early, sometimes late. You'll have to get a fix on it yourself."

Andy wasn't joking; in the three days I had been in Heather's Revenge, the bank had the screwiest time schedule I had ever seen. The place was supposed to open at 10:00 each morning; it was always early or late by as much as nine minutes.

Closing time was even worse. Instead of the posted three o'clock shut-down, it had been 2:45, 3:22, and 3:14. Evidently they did business if and when they felt like it.

I looked at my watch. 3:45. I got up and put on my padded-shoulder sports coat. It's two sizes too big and adds pounds to any description somebody might want to give of me. I slipped on my elevator shoes; they have three-inch lifts, which means people see a six-foot man instead of my actual five foot nine. Other precautions include a m u s t a c h e , black hair dye, and a convincing two-inch scar on my left cheek. I've had some of my closest friends ignore me when I'm working.

I locked my room and almost ran over an old guy in the hallway. He didn't have any teeth and looked ready for Social Security and checkers. "Sorry, fella," I said, "didn't see you."

He gave me a sneer and disappeared into the room next to mine. I shook my head and found my parked rental compact.

It took me almost an hour to

find the police station. It was hidden behind some jungle plantings and a billboard which read: Support Your Local Police. Some irritated J.D. had scratched out Police and written above it: Hoodlums.

The police station was quite a way from the bank. I drove as fast as the law allowed and reached the bank in seven minutes. Then I took the main four roads leading away from the shopping center and searched for a substation. Nothing. The phone book listed the single address. Promising, very promising.

I went into a coffee shop and noticed the woman in the red knit suit. I had wondered about her since I had come to town. She visited the bank every day, carrying a paper bag. The bank always closed right afterward. I couldn't figure it out.

She was sitting at the counter, so I decided, what the heck. I sat down next to her and ordered a cup of coffee. I glanced over and smiled. She didn't have a ring on her left hand.

She smiled back without any effort to make a pitch of her own. Not that I expected one. She looked a little puzzled and asked, "Where have I seen you before?"

I set down my coffee and said "Maybe at the bank?"

"Of course! I have to go over there every day."

"Every day?" I tried to sound mildly interested.

"It's part of my job. I'm the hostess over at Rod's Steak House. My boss needs a lot of change every day, so I'm elected to get it."

"You poor thing. Some boss you must have. Who likes to wait around in some bank?"

She laughed. Her eyes had a distracting way of opening and closing. "No, no. You just don't know the system."

"System?"

"Sure. I used to work at the bank, so I know all the girls. When I'm ready to go over there, I call up to see how busy they are. If they're too busy, one of the girls gives me a buzz just before they close up. I'm only a couple of minutes away."

It was beautiful, and in technicolor. I wanted to reach over and plant a kiss on her; she looked like she might enjoy it too. We talked for a few more minutes. Her name was Pat. She told me to come by for a steak and a drink. I let her convince me it was the only place in town to eat. After three days of hotel chow I was ready to believe her.

I went back to the hotel. On the way up the shabbily covered stairs I noticed my toothless neighbor sitting in the lobby. It looked as if he was talking to himself or to his newspaper, I couldn't tell which.

Once I reached my room I carefully went over the details. Payday—Friday at closing time—was less than 24 hours off. My disguise didn't appear to attract any undesirable attention. I had tried to stay away from most of the people in town anyway.

The bank appeared to be an easy "take." The money was all out and ready to be picked up. My friend, Pat, solved any problems about getting inside before the escort arrived to pick up the payroll. I hadn't noticed any hidden cameras in the bank; apparently, the advanced practices of big-city banking hadn't yet caught on in Heather's Revenge. And best of all it would take the police at least five minutes to arrive, even if an alarm was sounded while I was still inside. I hadn't seen a single patrol car during closing time since I had been in town.

It looked good. Real good.

Satisfied, I put on my coat and went out to look for a steak and some conversation. I found Pat and a pound of sirloin. She was easy to talk to and avoided asking stupid questions. She knocked off work an hour early and we found a back booth and drank a little, danced a little, and even held hands a little.

I could tell she was surprised when I told her I had to turn in early. Maybe she had been expecting a proposition. Anyway,

I saved us both a lot of trouble by telling her I wanted to get up early. I kissed her lightly on the cheek and left the lounge in a hurry. She was nice.

But \$200,000 was even nicer.

The first thing Friday morning I got rid of the car. I paid my bill, using the name Jack Sloane, primarily because I've always liked the initials J.S. In different towns I've been John Steele, Jackson Slaughter, James Slider, Jake Simes, Jerome Snedeker, and others I can't even remember. Constant use of the same initials eliminates any questions about monogrammed luggage, clothing, or initialed laundry marks.

The hotel room was as stuffy as ever when I got back to wait. It was a long wait. From ten o'clock to 2:00 p.m., 126 people went through the glass doors of the bank. I finally got tired of counting and started watching for Pat.

2:50 No Pat.

2:55 No Pat.

3:00. No Pat. I started to sweat a little.

3:05. Still no Pat. I started to crane my neck in both directions, waiting for her to show up.

3:07. Her car pulled into the driveway near the market and headed for the bank. I put on my coat and walked out of the hotel. There was not a single item left behind in the room. All my gear was sitting in another car,

rented from another agency, under another name, a block away from the hotel. No problems.

I walked from the hotel looking straight ahead. I crossed the street and headed for the bank a hundred yards away. Pat had stopped in the drug store for something and had now come out and was walking toward the bank.

Fifty yards. Pat entered the bank, carrying her paper bag. In a few moments I covered the last few yards and followed her on in.

Pat had gone up to one of the tellers. There were two windows open; everybody else seemed to be involved in getting the payroll ready. Besides myself and Pat there were only two other customers in the bank—a young kid with horn-rim glasses and a guy in a corduroy suit. No problems at all. I reached inside my coat to grab my Colt Cobra.

"All right, everybody. Stick 'em up!"

If you think I would yell such a stupid thing, then you just don't know me at all. When I heard the voice behind me, my only thought was: I should have pushed him down the stairs.

I looked behind me. Sure enough.

It was Old Toothless. The old geezer from the hotel. He was standing there, holding a mildewed orange sack, waving what looked like a long-barreled Navy

Colt. My God, I go a thousand miles to pull a job and I run into an ancient Jesse James!

Everybody was reaching toward the light fixtures. Gramps had them scared enough to insult their mothers-in-law.

I leaned against one of the customer counters. I felt sick. While I was feeling sick, Old Toothless was having the time of his life.

"Fill up the sack! Fast. I said fast, dammit!"

Money was flying into the orange sack. It was such a disgusting performance, by such a disgusting amateur, I started to get mad.

When Old Toothless came wandering by, dragging his sack, I picked up a marble ashtray, half filled with sand, and conked him on the head.

Gramps took a nosedive and flattened his beak on the marble floor. I picked up the sackful of currency and felt like clobbering him with it. Old Toothless made a few funny noises and then was kind enough to remain unconscious.

Everybody came galloping up to me. A big guy in a wash-and-wear suit hurried up and collected the sack. He grabbed my arm and said, "Great work! I'm Mitchell, president of the bank. I'm owing to you, Mr.—"

"Sloane. Jack Sloane."

"Mr. Sloane, that sure was

quick thinking. Mighty quick. This cinches it! I'm going to have one of those hidden cameras installed *tomorrow*! If it wasn't for you, I might have been one day too late."

"That's wonderful," I said. I felt a little sicker.

Pat came over and touched my arm. "I met this man yesterday, Daddy. You always said I was a good judge of character."

Dazed, I looked down at her from my elevator shoes. "Daddy?"

"Right, Jack. This is my father. Remember, I said I used to work here?"

"So you did." This was getting ridiculous. I wanted to go out and cry on the front seat of my rented car.

Pat grabbed her father by the arm. "Daddy, this may be the man you've been looking for to help you."

Mitchell sized me up in a glance. I tried to smile. It was one of the most difficult things I've ever done. He returned my smile and said, "Son, how would you like a job?"

It turned out a little differently from the way I expected. A cameraman arrived and snapped pictures. I was the local hero, courtesy of a bored staff writer on the town scandal sheet, who used up a year's supply of superlatives describing my conk

job of Old Toothless.

That wasn't all. I had to write Andy Tillman and tell him that instead of robbing the bank I had just been appointed its new manager-trainee loan officer. After two months Pat began to get ideas about marriage and Mitchell started playing more golf. And I started to like the whole setup.

As a matter of fact, I must

say I got the hang of things in no time at all.

The loans, for instance.

I've made five so far.

First of all, there was one to John Steele. Then to Jackson Slaughter, James Slider, Jake Simes, and Jerome Snedeker.

It will be a long time before I run out of names with the initials J.S.



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another doubleheader . . .

Before we could publish Len Gray's third story, "The Caper in Heather's Revenge," his fourth story came in. Immediately we asked ourselves: why not let history repeat, why not let lightning strike twice? So, just as we published Mr. Gray's first and second stories back to back, we now publish his third and fourth stories in the same issue—another doubleheader . . .

Ah, "suspension of disbelief"! A wonderful aid to reading pleasure. Len Gray has a most amusing turn of mind and phrase . . .

GUEST SPEAKER

by **LEN GRAY**

66 **L**ADIES! OH, LADIES!" The speaker was Daphne Delaney, who was standing patiently in the middle of the stage. Seeing that her gentler tones were going unnoticed, Daphne snapped, "Everyone! Quiet this instant!"

Silence.

There were those in the audience of the Southern Hills Women's Club who had felt the wrath of Daphne Delaney. As Ida Sims put it, "Daphne has the temperament of an aroused Apache."

Satisfied, the Chairwoman started again. "Ladies, I'm so pleased by our turnout today. It's wonderful to see so many members. And their husbands too!"

Maude Crawford, husbandless and subject to fits of despondency, tittered. She immediately slid down in her front-row-chair as the Indian eye of Daphne lanced out at her.

"As I was saying," Daphne smiled, "it's good to see you all. Today we are indeed honored. We have with us Mrs. Ellen Goodbody, social worker and observer of people. She's here to talk with us about a marvelous subject—Crime in Our Supermarkets. Ladies, Mrs. Goodbody!"

A tall distinguished woman rose from a front-row seat and climbed to the stage, accepting the applause as altogether fitting.

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Back in the fourth row Sadie Fellum and Louise Lester winked at each other. "Look at that hair," Sadie whispered. "I'll just bet it's a rinse job."

"Or a wig," Louise ventured.

The guest speaker stopped in the middle of the stage, patting her natural and luxuriant red hair. The crowd of people at her feet hushed and she gave them their first jolt.

"First of all," Ellen Goodbody whipped out, "everyone in this audience is a thief. Or a potential one."

Several members of the audience looked nervously at their neighbors.

"Yes," Mrs. Goodbody continued, "we've all stolen office pencils, carried home stationery, snatched those paper clips, haven't we?" Her tone was almost confidential, as though she herself was planning a robbery any minute.

Maude Crawford shifted in her seat. Pencils, she thought. It so happened that Maude, a valued employee of Mark's Stationery Store, had stolen 155 pencils and ballpoint pens in the last six months. She knew the exact figure because she kept a record and posted it once a week.

The woman named Goodbody was saying, "People steal for a number of reasons. We convince ourselves that it isn't really stealing. How often have you told

yourself or heard someone, a friend perhaps, insist that everyone does it, so what's wrong?

"People steal and keep on stealing. They resent their employers, and stealing is a way to get back at them. People steal to get a bonus, the little 'extras' in life. People steal for the thrill of it. And the supermarkets of this country are a prime target."

Sam Jefferson, occupying a back-row seat, nodded amen to that. As proprietor of Jefferson's Market he had witnessed the theft of everything from a single orange to the champion of them all, a little old lady who stole a young boy's Doberman pinscher as the youngster turned in pop bottles for refund. Sam Jefferson listened carefully. There was always the chance to learn something new, something that would help him.

The redheaded expert nodded at her audience. "All right then, people steal from our markets. So what can managers do to combat the problem?" Mrs. Goodbody seemed to smile for a moment and then went on, "First, use mirrors. Make them plainly visible so the would-be thief knows he or she can be seen in the act.

"Use scanning cameras. If you can't afford operational ones, set up dummy cameras. In this way thieves will at least *think* you're on guard."

Sam Jefferson smiled. He had just learned something new,

something that would help him.

He wasn't alone. A well-dressed woman in the middle of the audience was making notes. She was doing so because she made her living as a professional thief. She had signed the guest list as Linda Smith. People nowadays accepted anyone who used the name of Smith; it had to be a real name because no one would be foolish enough to fake such a thing.

Phyllis Cramtree, the woman's real name, was certainly **not** foolish. A high-school dropout, Phyllis was self-taught and spent her free time reading and appreciating the works of James Joyce and Henry James. She learned early in life the value of education and pursued learning at every possible moment. As, for instance, now. These tips could be turned into cash later. Phyllis adjusted her valuable gold-coin bracelet and continued writing.

Ellen Goodbody was shaking a long bony finger at her audience. "Now don't for one minute think that any precaution taken is the final answer. Citizens should understand some of the methods, some of the angles employed by the professional shoplifter."

Phyllis Cramtree was quite ready to hear some of the angles.

Mrs. Goodbody obliged her. "First of all, receptacles for the stolen goods. There are the obvious places such as the pocket,

the purse. But did you ever consider the hat? The professionals do. They have small pockets sewn into their hats into which they hide toilet articles and expensive delicacies.

"And don't forget the umbrella. It's quite easy to drop foodstuffs into a closed umbrella and then walk merrily out past unsuspecting checkers. Other examples? What about a large bandage around the hand? It can easily be lifted and utilized as a storehouse for small but expensive goodies."

Sam Jefferson, store owner, was almost in a state of shock. He remembered the young man who had cruised the aisles of the store for over an hour and then bought a ten-cent candy bar. He had large puffy bandages on both hands. And—and—he wore an enormous straw hat.

The guest speaker continued, "Let's consider the kind of items a professional shoplifter purchases. Such as a large jar of plums or anything containing a dark liquid. It's quite simple to open the lid and drop in razors, small bottles, you name it. And how about bags of fruit? The checker glances and sees a top row of apples and weighs the sack at so much a pound. Is the bag full of apples? Perhaps something else lies at the bottom. Expensive meats, for instance."

Sadie Fellum and Louise Lester

were enthralled. Sadie, who ran her household of five children and a 250-pound husband on a starvation budget, was thinking more in terms of nuts. If I get a big enough bag and stuff it full, nice and tight at the top—

Louise was considering peppermint sticks. Her husband, Paul, loved the striped candy and it came in a box. A large, easily opened box. All the many bottles of makeup Louise seldom purchased because of the cost suddenly became amazingly available. Open one end of the box, take out a few peppermint sticks, maybe even suck on one, then casually stick the small bottles—

“—and the use of baby carriages,” Mrs. Goodbody was saying. “They’re used quite often. Just lift up the little one and do some tucking, shifting, hiding. Covers can conceal a treasure-trove every day.”

Phyllis, alias Linda Smith, had two pages filled with notes and was busily working on number three. This wasn’t just marvelous; it was the best thing that had happened to her in months. Ever since Phyllis had substituted a fake ring of cut glass for the \$500 diamond ring in the San Francisco jewelry store.

“Some ladies, regrettably, I might add,” the guest speaker informed her audience, “use the between-the-legs operation. They

practise a long time and finally, by walking carefully and slowly, are able to conceal and hold a large object between their thighs. Of course, they have to be careful. It’s quite fatal when they walk calmly past the checker and drop a good-sized roast on the floor.”

Sam Jefferson was thinking again. Sam had many regular customers and one of the most regular was Mrs. Carter. She always came in on Tuesdays and Thursdays and never spent more than five or six dollars each visit. The odd thing, now that Sam thought about it, was the fact Mrs. Carter never bought any meat. She could be patronizing a butcher, of course, but she had said many times, quite emphatically in fact, that her husband was dead. Sam Jefferson had never seen a child with her.

And Mrs. Carter walked with a military bearing. Back straight, deliberate steps, never a hurried motion. As though she had something tucked between her legs. Sam thought some more about it, faintly listening to the speaker’s voice.

“Some shoplifters work alone,” Mrs. Goodbody was saying, “and others prowl in teams. Once in a while you hear about a group of four pulling an old routine: two of them have a loud, attention-getting fight which brings over the management, which in turn allows the other

pair to clean house. Sometimes they even lift handbags from interested customers.

"There are other maneuvers. I know of one professional named Rita Palmer who waits for a lone woman or man loaded down with groceries to come out of a store. When this Palmer sees a likely prospect she approaches the person. Palmer always wears a grocery-store apron and has been known to have a badge with *Department Manager* printed on it. She tells the person they forgot to pick up the new giveaway stamps or some game cards. Something like that. The customer always goes back inside to check while the kind manager watches their groceries. I don't think I have to tell you what happens next."

Out in the audience Phyllis Cramtree, professional thief, was smiling and writing furiously. Oh, this was gorgeous—truly gorgeous! She could hardly wait to try it out. Her gold bracelet dangled merrily.

Sadie and Louise listened eagerly to every word. Both women, without knowing it, had their mouths open and their eyes wide. This was some stuff! Something to be cherished, something to perhaps be—implemented. Yes, that was the right word.

Chairwoman Daphne Delaney, she of the savage eye, was pleased and proud. From her aisle seat

she could see that the audience was really enjoying this meeting. Attendance at the weekly meetings had been lagging recently, but today, my goodness! Look at the faces of these people, Daphne thought. Yes, Mrs. Goodbody was indeed making an impression.

The guest speaker was in the process of concluding her talk. "Yes, ladies and gentlemen, shoplifting in our supermarkets is a problem many of us ignore, but it's there all the same. Be aware of the problem; do something. Support your store managers who often operate on a very small margin of profit. And as for the store managers here in the audience today, I say, organize! Have regular business meetings, make suggestions, consult your lawyers for advice. I hope I've given you something to think about. Good day, and thank you for your attention."

Ellen Goodbody left the stage to thunderous applause. Several members rushed forward to greet the redheaded expert on shoplifting.

One of those to leave—hurriedly, in fact—was Sam Jefferson. Sam had to see a man about a camera and he wanted to have a long talk with his department managers.

Sadie Fellum and Louise Lester converged on Mrs. Goodbody. "Oh, we loved your talk!" they exclaimed.

The red-haired speaker accepted the compliments amiably, bowing slightly, shaking hands all around. One of the hands she took was that of Phyllis Cramtree, more commonly known as Linda Smith.

Daphne Delaney excused herself, saying, "I've got to get more coffee cups out of the closet."

Walking across the carpet she reached the storage closet and opened the door.

A small elderly woman fell out onto the rug. She was gagged and her hands and feet were tied.

Daphne did something out of character. She screamed.

People immediately crowded around. Someone remembered to take the gag out of the victim's mouth.

It proved to be a vocal victim. "About time! About time, I should say!"

"Who—who are you?" Daphne managed to ask.

"Ellen Goodbody, you idiot! Who do you think I am?"

"What?"

The woman squirmed on the rug. "You fools! You've been taken! Laughed at! By a master.

Rita Palmer does these things."

"*Rita Palmer!*" nearly everyone said at once.

"Yes, shoplifter extraordinary. I've been chasing red-haired Rita for years. I got here early and guess who was waiting for me? Ha! Untie me, you fools!"

The fools turned and looked around the auditorium. The fake Mrs. Goodbody, the real Rita Palmer, was nowhere to be seen.

"Oh, no!" the husbandless Maude Crawford shouted.

"What's the matter?" Daphne asked, frowning.

"My diamond ring! It's gone! Gone! I sh—shook her hand," she wailed, remembering.

Sadie Fellum grinned. "Criminal or not," she said, "that's what I call a real pro."

Thunk!

The *thunk!* was none other than Phyllis Cramtree, also named Linda Smith, who had also done some handshaking and was now unconscious on the rug.

"I wonder what's the matter with her?" someone questioned.

Phyllis couldn't tell them. She was long gone.

So was her valuable gold-coin bracelet.



Can murder be prophesied? And if the prophecy comes true, is it a miracle? And if you were investigating a miracle, whom would you like to have at your side, helping you? Obviously, a man who understands man-made miracles—none other than the great Maître Glenthier . . .

THE WEAPON FROM NOWHERE

by CONWAY LONSTAR

IT WAS A MAN WITH A MISSION when I walked into Maître Glenthier's magic shop one April afternoon. Threading my way through the usual assortment of illusions with price tags—and healthy price tags at that—I spotted the proprietor-magician himself in the back room, bending over a complicated piece of apparatus I had never seen before.

Without looking around, Glenthier said, "My crystal ball tells me that Art Shores just walked in, and not merely to pass the time of day, either."

"I didn't know my walk was that distinctive," I said.

"It's not, but your face is—reflected in these mirrors." I realized then that he was working on an intricate arrangement of reflecting glass. "You look too determined for a social call. What's up?"

"Have you heard of Mrs. de Seur?"

"The housewife in the suburbs who suddenly discovered she has the gift of second sight? Who hasn't?"

"Her latest prediction," I informed him, "makes the others look like peanuts. She's predicted a murder at ten o'clock tonight—a murder in her own house!"

"What did she do—send engraved invitations to the Homicide squad?"

"I don't know about that, but the wire services got an anonymous tip and passed it on to me. I'd already been approached to write her up, and this clinches it—if the murder comes off. Needless to say, I'm going out there, and equally needless to say, I'd like you to come along. If there's any hanky-panky you're the one to spot it."

Glenthier reached up and pulled a Kennedy half dollar out of the air, looking thoughtful. "What can you tell me about her?"

"Not much. I've done some research on her for this article, but all I know is she's lived quietly for years in a Westchester suburb—Scarsdale—was married to a stockbroker, and has no children. Her husband died last year and she suddenly discovered this 'gift,' in quotes. I can't find out anything about her or de Seur before they settled in Westchester, but there's a rumor they were once on the stage."

Glenthier looked interested.

"Mindreading? Clairvoyance?"

I shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. Not under that name, though. I've checked—no record of de Seur."

"How do we get in tonight? Journalists invited?"

"Your own mindreading isn't too bad," I grinned. "She had to be coaxed, but she agreed to let me in—and about half a dozen reporters as well. You can be my photographer."

"Just what did she predict?"

"There will be a death," I quoted. "The message is not too clear, but I hope to see more before the time comes. There is a murderer in this house who will kill at ten tonight."

"She's got something up her housewifely sleeve, I'll bet you a rabbit from a top hat. My

engagement book happens to be clear for this evening. Let's go, and you can tell me more over dinner."

In the restaurant Glenthier was full of questions, to most of which I didn't have answers. I had one though—about the people closest to Mrs. de Seur. There was a young niece who had lived with her for a year or two, Eugenia Coyn, and a Slavic servant she had hired recently. A man named Bill Mackrae had also been on the scene a great deal since her husband's death—a good-looking man with no visible means of support.

At nine o'clock we presented ourselves at an impressive Colonial home on Merridue St. in Scarsdale. The maid, Strevna, let us in, throwing dark suspicious glances at us and muttering to herself. She ushered us into a library at the rear of the house and then marched off, a fierce bony figure.

Mrs. de Seur was sitting in a big leather chair, resting her head wearily against its back. Her eyes were half closed, but she opened them to appraise us. She was a short dumpy woman who could have profited from a course at a charm school. I'd have thought the hungriest wolf wouldn't take the slightest notice of her; yet the tall handsome man at her side was hovering attentively.

We introduced ourselves,

Glenthier improvising the name of Hopper Hartog for his alias, and then we took two of the straight chairs that were scattered around, as yet unoccupied.

"Glad to meet you," Mrs. de Seur said in a voice that matched her appearance for tiredness and lack of personality. "This is Mr. Mackrae." It seemed to me that, tired or not, she looked pretty sharply at Glenthier. We had fixed him up with a camera, of course, and maybe it bothered her because she realized she wasn't photogenic.

Mackrae took drink orders from us, and brought something for Mrs. de Seur without asking her what she wanted.

"I still say you're making a big mistake," he said to her worriedly. "Why don't we just clear the house and go somewhere? I have a feeling we're asking for trouble."

"No, Bill, I've got to see it through," she said wanly. "Otherwise I'll never feel safe."

"I can protect you," the tall man growled.

Further conversation was cut short by the arrival of reporters, some of whom I knew, who seated themselves in the empty chairs with mumbled greetings.

Mrs. de Seur cleared her throat. Glenthier started to reach up, then shoved his hand in his pocket. I think he was going to materialize another of those Kennedy half

dollars before he remembered he was supposed to be a photographer.

"Gentlemen," the woman said in her flat grating voice, "I have been resting to conserve my strength, to devote it all to trying to—" She broke off with a sharp indrawn breath as the inner door opened. A man entered and closed the door, wordlessly. He leaned his back against the panels and nodded to her.

"He's got detective written all over him," whispered Glenthier to me, and I nodded agreement. That answered another of Glenthier's questions—whether she believed enough in her "gift" to call in the police—and whether *they* believed enough in it to be present.

"As I was saying," she continued, taking no further notice of the newcomer, "I shall try to penetrate the future, to receive a vibration..." She shook her head. "I can't get anything. Perhaps, if it weren't so bright—"

Mackrae turned off some lights, leaving only the dull glow of one lamp in a corner, and returned to the woman's chair, perching himself on its arm.

She closed her eyes and pressed a plump hand to her forehead. You could have heard a feather drop.

Suddenly she gasped, then sat bolt upright, her eyes wide. "A man will die! At ten o'clock, that

was correct. But I really thought that *I* was to be the victim. How strange!"

It was now 9:30.

Some of the reporters began to fire questions, and for the sake of appearances Glenthier took a couple of pictures.

Mrs. de Seur shook her head. "That's all I can tell you. If you had kept quiet I might have learned more. But now—I get nothing." She looked drained.

Mackrae stalked across the room to the French windows and threw them open.

"I'm going to look around out there," he said grimly.

"Wait, I'll go with you," Glenthier said, and at the same time the man at the inner door yelled, "Stop!" But both of them were talking to empty air. Drapes fluttered in the breeze. Glenthier went over for a look, but came back to his seat.

"Pitch-dark out there," he murmured to me. "I couldn't tell where he went. But my own brand of prophesy says we'll discover he's involved in all this hocus-pocus, right up to his handsome dark eyebrows."

The silence in the library persisted while the minutes wore on. Mrs. de Seur rested quietly in her chair. The rest of us kept checking our watches. 9:55. 9:58. 9:59.

10:00.

Nothing.

We all glanced at each other and began to relax—until then I hadn't realized how tense I had been.

And then—*crack!*

A shot exploded outdoors. Mrs. de Seur screamed. Our eyes were fixed on the French windows where the drapes began moving back and forth in a kind of frenzy. Then the tall figure of a man appeared. He sort of grunted, there was a light thud, and he pitched forward on his face into the room. Mrs. de Seur screamed again.

The detective at the door got there first, with Glenthier a close second and myself at the magician's elbow. When the body was turned over, we saw that it was Mackrae, and we got another shock. Protruding from his chest was a knife!

"Dead," muttered the detective. He looked at the still-smoking gun that Mackrae had dropped as he came in, which had made the thud we heard. Then he shouted out through the open French windows. When one of his men appeared, the detective gave some sharp orders, then made for the telephone.

Mrs. de Seur never moved; she sat hunched in her chair.

The detective called headquarters to send a doctor, technicians, and equipment. As soon as he hung up, he began a quick questioning—designed, so it seemed, to establish that we knew nothing,

had seen nothing, and could be dismissed. It was true enough that none of us had anything helpful to offer, and the reporters hardly needed urging to leave—they had news to report with a capital N.

On the other hand, Glenthier and I were anxious to stick around, so we dropped the name of our old friend Grove Maighan of N.Y. Homicide, which worked like Grade A magic. The detective called Maighan, and was evidently informed that the detective was loaded with luck to have Maître Glenthier on the scene of the crime. When he hung up, the detective beamed at us.

"Ted Ceviet's the name, gentlemen. I don't mind saying this sort of case is a little out of my line. We wouldn't even have come out on a crank call like this, but the old girl's predictions have been making the front page, and the Chief wasn't taking any chances. But how *could* she foresee this? Maighan says you're a wizard, Glenthier, with these supernatural-looking problems. Any ideas?"

"Oh, yes," Glenthier said, reaching into the air for a Kennedy half dollar. "I have ideas. But they need crystallizing, to say the least. Mackrae fired the gun, I suppose?"

"Looks that way," nodded Ceviet. "As if he saw someone out there and fired at him, and then another guy stabbed Mackrae."

"No, sir," broke in a new voice

from the doorway, followed by some commotion as two women burst in, each accompanied by a plainclothesman. It was one of the men who had spoken.

Eugenia Coyn, who could have given her aunt lessons in charm—she was a real dish to look at—glared at Mrs. de Seur. "Now see what you've done!" she said angrily. "I hope you're satisfied." Her aunt hardly looked at her.

"I quit," was Strevna's terse contribution.

"What did you mean, Mannie?" Ceviet finally got a chance to ask.

"I was with this gal here, in her room. It's right over this one. Directly after the shot I looked out the window and beamed my flashlight on that gent. There was no knife in him at that time, and no one else near him. I watched him right up to the moment he came inside."

"Could the girl have done it?" asked Ceviet.

"She wasn't near the window," was the answer, and the other plainclothesman admitted that was also true for the maid, who had been in the kitchen under his guard.

"Psychokinesis," came the flat voice from the leather chair. "They both have the power."

It took a while, after that contribution, to prevail on the two women to take Mrs. de Seur upstairs, with their guards still in

attendance. "If Mannie Collspath and Mitchell Pasanno say the two women couldn't have done it, they couldn't have. They're both good men," said Ceviet. Turning to Glenthier he asked, "What's psychokinesis?"

"Manipulation of physical objects by mental means," answered the magician. "People who've studied it, like Professor Rhine and others at Duke University, claim it works. I don't believe it myself. Their research methods are a little loose in my opinion."

"Have you a better explanation of how this could have been done?" sighed Ceviet. "I had a man outside—he wasn't in the rear until too late to see anything, but I told him to search the grounds, and he reported while the two women were here. He found nothing—no footprints, except Mackrae's. And there was no one near the door on my side. I'm going to be the laughingstock of the force."

At that point his technicians arrived, and the usual hustle and bustle of fingerprinting, photographing, and so on followed. In due course the doctor pronounced that it was the knife that had killed Mackrae.

We went to talk to Mrs. de Seur, looking into the kitchen and Eugenia Coyn's room on the way. Both rooms were in the rear of the house, but there didn't seem to be any way that either woman

could have stabbed Mackrae without her guard knowing. If anyone in the library had done it, we'd have known. If we ruled out psychokinesis—and Glenthier really knows what he's talking about in such matters—there wasn't much left. Suicide seemed the only answer physically possible, but that's not the way suicides happen. Whom or what had Mackrae been shooting at? How had Mrs. de Seur known in advance that it would happen? It all added up to a king-size headache.

Ceviet looked as if he were beaten. Glenthier just looked thoughtful. Nor did the magician's expression change when he stubbed out a cigarette in his closed fist, then opened an empty hand.

When we reached her, Mrs. de Seur was crying—which did nothing to improve her looks.

"I was going to marry Bill," she sobbed. "He's been so good to me since my husband died. Eugenia and Strevna are both jealous because of him. Which of them did it, Mr. Ceviet?"

"You predicted it. Don't you know?" he snapped.

"No," she said seriously. "It may come to me, but I feel somehow it won't. You do understand, don't you, that predicting it didn't *make* it happen?" The poor woman was rather pathetic, trying to make us understand that second sight wasn't

a method of murder.

"I know how it happened," Glenthier announced suddenly, "and I know who did it. If only I could think of the name—"

"Great," grumbled Ceviet. "You know who, but you don't know the name?"

"Got it!" Glenthier was triumphant. "Alisa!"

At this apparently meaningless name Mrs. de Seur turned white as a ghost.

"You're mad! Who is this man?" she protested shrilly.

"It will be easy enough to establish that you're Alisa. Besides, microscopic examination can prove the knife was in your chair—shoved down next to or under the cushion. There's bound to be marks on the leather from the knife.

"There's your murderess, Ceviet. Her 'gift' should have told her she'd be found out."

"Damn you," she said.

Glenthier was only too happy to explain to Ceviet and me later, over refreshing Scotchies in a quiet suburban cocktail lounge.

"Misdirection, as usual," he said. "The shot was meant to point to a killer *outside*—and to provide distraction. Mackrae and she were in it together—up to a point. She added a twist of her own that wasn't in *his* program. He was to go outside and fire a shot, and she was to

stab anyone who took her fancy, as long as the victim wasn't near her. They probably didn't intend for her actually to kill—an attack would have been near enough to her prediction to get her a lot of impressive publicity."

"But," objected Ceviet, "how *could* she have stabbed someone who was not near her?—to say nothing of doing it in front of witnesses without being seen."

"Art told me she'd been on the stage, and reasoning pointed to her having been a knife thrower. A thorough investigation will confirm it, but I've saved you the trouble by recalling a little lady from my circus days who was billed in the side shows as 'Alisa and Her Magic Knives.' She was so smooth and fast you hardly saw her hand move, and she was a sure shot standing or sitting.

"Tonight she was to have thrown her knife right after the shot, or when Mackrae made his entrance, the two occasions they provided to distract us—when we weren't on such a sharp lookout, when we thought it was all over after the shot. But *her* plan was to fling the knife at *him* as he fumbled with the drapes. She was lightning-quick, catching him the split second after his chest showed through the curtains—while leaving us with the impression that it had happened *before* he came in. What we thought was his grunt was the impact of the knife, which

she tried to cover with a scream."

"All right," I argued. "She told us why she killed Mackrae—he was blackmailing her—maybe her husband's death also involved a little of her sleight of hand and he knew about it. But why in Houdini's name did they plan this whole rigamarole?"

"Money's the logical reason," said Glenthier, "and Mackrae wanted her to have it—I suppose he's spent whatever she had. I'd say she wanted to go on the stage as a mindreader—I wouldn't be surprised if that used to be her husband's line before he became

a stockbroker; then she'd know all the tricks. But you can see she hasn't the looks; who'd hire her? But with the publicity she'd get from this stunt her looks wouldn't matter; she could choose her spots—and her fee.

"Besides," finished Maître Glenthier, "her name—and I don't mean Alisa—was a dead giveaway."

"It's so simple when you know how it's done," said Ceviet, echoing a thought I've often had. Glenthier miraculously pulled two Kennedy half dollars out of the air and left them as a tip.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Yes, anagrams again. The letters of "Mrs. de Seur" can be rearranged to spell "murderess." And "Alisa" anagrams to "alias."

Maître Glenthier should have been easily recognizable as the great magician-detective—The Great Merlini. His Watson, Art Shores, is better known as Ross Harte, and Grove Maighan of N.Y. Homicide is really Homer Gavigan of same.

Other anagrams:

Bill Mackrae = blackmailer

Ted Ceviet = detective

Eugenia Coyn = a young niece

Strevna = servant

Merridue St. = murder site

Mitchell Pasanno = plainclothesman

Mannie Collspath = plainclothesman

Hopper Hartog = photographer

And finally, of course, The Great Merlini's creator, who has been known to play his character in real life and is a mighty tricky fellow in his own right: Conway Lonstar stands for Clayton Rawson, a master of mystery legerdemain.

NORMA SCHIER

Encore!

THE GREAT MERLINI

and The Compleat Smuggler—

Plutarch wrote in his MORALS: "Zeno first started that doctrine that knavery is the best defence against a knave." We know the doctrine more familiarly and more tersely as the proverb: "Set a thief to catch a thief" . . .

Now, once upon a time there was a professional magician who called himself Aldo the Enigma, and this ingenious fellow had the Customs Service buffaloed, stumped, stymied. Unless the Customs Chief could come up with a miracle, Aldo would come into the country with nearly half a million dollars' worth of diamonds—and without paying a cent in customs duty.

Inspector Homer Gavigan knew how to come up with a miracle. He simply set a magician to catch a magician . . .

MERLINI AND THE VANISHED DIAMONDS

by CLAYTON RAWSON

THE BLACK POLICE CAR HESITATED briefly on 42nd Street near Times Square. A tall lean figure stepped in and the car catapulted forward like a scared jackrabbit, its siren rising in a banshee howl.

"Merlini," Inspector Homer Gavigan said, "the gentleman whose lap you just landed in is

George Hurley. He's Chief of the Division of Investigation and Patrol of the Customs Service, and he wants to ask you a question."

The gnomelike little man who appeared as Merlini moved over had a neat military mustache, a mild pleasant voice, and cold blue eyes. "I want to know," he said flatly, "how you would go about

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making nearly half a million dollars disappear?"

It is no easy matter to startle a magician, but that did it. The Great Merlini blinked, hesitated, then said, "That sounds like fun. Where do I get—"

"It's not cash," Gavigan put in. "It's ice."

"Nearly half a million? Did somebody steal the North Pole?"

"No jokes, please. To the crooks George and I associate with, ice means jewels—and you know it."

"In this case," Hurley explained, "diamonds. An Amsterdam dealer gave us the tipoff and we've had the suspect under observation ever since. A customs agent came across on the same boat. Last night he searched the man's cabin and the stones were there then. The suspect had no visitors after that and didn't leave his cabin until the boat docked this morning."

"Three agents went up the gangplank the moment it hit the pier and covered him right from his cabin door to the customs inspection. No diamonds were listed on his declaration form, so we grabbed him. He got the A-One treatment—and there were no stones in his bags or on his person."

"A search by customs men who are sure they smell contraband," Inspector Gavigan added, "is something to see. Hurley's

boys are experts. They also took the cabin apart in case he hid the stuff there, intending to pick it up by coming back as a visitor on the next sailing day."

"That's an old one," Hurley said. "Most of the dodges are. I've found contraband in babies' milk bottles, wooden legs, phony rolls of camera film, fountain pens, chocolate creams, tulip bulbs, beards, a woman's hairdo, ear trumpets, hearing aids, mounted insect specimens, a shipment of boa constrictors, even on a corpse—"

"A corpse?"

"Yeah. One character bringing in relatives who had died abroad, always using a different port of entry. The day we got him, the body of his deceased sister—stolen from some French cemetery—was wrapped in a good many yards of Brussels lace and wearing \$140,000 in gems."

"How big a package," Merlini asked, "does a half million dollars' worth of diamonds make?"

"These are all top-quality blue-white stones. They crossed the Atlantic in his suitcase inside a silver cigarette lighter. Dimensions, two inches by three inches by one-quarter inch. When we opened it at inspection we found—just cotton and lighter fuel. What worries us is his profession."

"He sounds," Merlini guessed, "like a magician."

"And that," Gavigan announced, "wins you the trip to Hollywood, the automatic dishwasher, and one hundred pounds of soap flakes. He calls himself Aldo the Enigma. Know him?"

"Pierre Aldo. Yes. He's been playing the Continental music halls with a smooth card-manipulation act."

"Cards!" Hurley almost snorted. "I've seen enough card tricks today to last me a lifetime. He's been doing them all morning. Says he has to practise because American cards are bigger than the ones he's been used to."

"They're quite a bit larger," Merlini said. "And there are only thirty-two cards in Ecarte and Pique decks. He'd need a bit of practise to get the feel of an American fifty-two-card poker-size deck."

"I'll give him a passing grade right now," Hurley said glumly. "I wouldn't sit in on any game that had him in the same room."

"The Sûreté doesn't recommend it," Gavigan added. "They report he's been booked twice on crooked gambling charges and once did a two-year stretch on a confidence rap."

"Merlini," Hurley said, "the Inspector tells me he's seen you make an elephant disappear. So, if you'll explain how a magician would go about making a small parcel of diamonds vanish into

thin air, the Customs Service will give you a medal."

As the car stopped in front of a pier entrance, Merlini pushed his lighted cigarette into his closed left fist, blew a cloud of smoke at it, then slowly opened his fingers. The cigarette was gone.

"When I do that," he said, "I don't usually let a crew of customs men search me. And when I make an elephant disappear I don't let the audience take the theater apart the way you must have done with Aldo's luggage and cabin. I can see I'm going to enjoy meeting the enigmatic Pierre. He may have a new one up his sleeve."

Gavigan opened the car door. "Let's go. Hurley can only hold this bird for twenty-four hours and there's not much of it left."

A customs agent stood on guard before a door on A deck. "That's his cabin," Hurley said, "but all the movable furniture, bedding, and such stuff is in here." He opened the door of the cabin just opposite. Three chairs, a mattress, sheets, pillows, two lamps, a writing desk, and several dresser drawers occupied the center of the room. The bottom coverings of the chairs had been removed, exposing the springs; the lamps had been disassembled.

"He watched your examination?" Merlini asked.

Hurley nodded. "That's stan-

dard practice. It's the suspect who gives us the most help. When he's calm and relaxed we know we're looking in the wrong places. But when he begins to get nervous it means we're getting warm. I once examined three trunks, four suitcases, and a couple of hatboxes, and found a pearl necklace inside a bottle of suntan oil in under five minutes just by keeping one eye on the woman.

"But this Aldo doesn't seem to have nerves. He just sits there dealing himself pat poker hands and grinning every time we draw a blank. He's been grinning a lot." Hurley waved a hand at the furniture. "You want to give this stuff a once-over?"

"I doubt it," Merlini said. "Let's take a look at Pierre. But don't tell him I'm a magician."

The writers of advertising copy who describe the luxurious cabin appointments for the cruise folders would have been shocked at the bare, cheerless aspect of Aldo's cabin. The only remaining decoration, if you could call him that, was a tired and very glum customs agent who leaned against one wall. He was scowling at a fat round-faced little man sitting cross-legged on the floor—a man no movie director would ever cast as a cardsharp, and one no card player would ever suspect of possessing the ability he was now demonstrating.

His right hand, holding a deck of cards, moved up and down in a blur of motion, shuffling the cards off into his left. Then, with the rapid precision of a well-oiled automaton, he dealt five hands of poker. He looked up at the glum customs agent and grinned broadly.

"Okay?"

The agent grunted. "I didn't see anything wrong with the deal, but then I'm no slow-motion camera. My money says the best cards are in your hand again."

Aldo laughed. "I do not play cards for money. If I win everyone thinks I cheat. If I lose they say I am a no-good magician."

In one continuous fluid movement Aldo's right hand gathered the cards he had dealt to himself, turned them face up, and spread them in a neat fan. He had a full house—three aces and two kings.

"But if the sucker doesn't know you're a magician," Hurley said from the doorway, "you take him to the cleaners."

Aldo scooped up the remaining cards and shuffled the deck again. "Cleaners?" he asked, still grinning. "What is that?" He began dealing again, this time with one hand only.

"Enjoying himself, isn't he?" Gavigan said.

Hurley nodded. "He's acting much too damned pleased with

himself. And that means the stuff is here somewhere—right under our noses.”

Aldo said nothing. He smiled enigmatically and turned up a royal flush in spades.

Merlini looked down at the open empty suitcase on the floor near the foot of the bed. Its contents had been laid out neatly beside it. “You find some odd things in a magician’s luggage, don’t you?”

Hurley grunted. “Colored silk handkerchiefs by the yard, a couple hundred feet of rope, a birdcage, a dozen billiard balls—”

Merlini picked up one of the balls and hefted it. “These are all solid?”

“Yeah.” Hurley pointed to a small red-lacquered box bearing Chinese characters. “That has a secret compartment, but it’s empty. We took all this stuff and the clothes he’s wearing down to Varick Street and gave them a fluoroscopic examination. That doesn’t spot diamonds too well—they’re nearly transparent to x-rays—but it’ll show cavities in objects that should be sold.”

Inspector Gavigan picked up a book, *La Prestidigitation Sans Appareils*, and riffled the pages.

“No hollowed-out books,” Hurley said. “We cut his soap into little pieces, squeezed out all his toothpaste and shaving cream, cut open every last pill in half a dozen medicine bottles, took his

pen and wrist watch apart. His teeth and eyes are his own.”

“Teeth and eyes?”

“False teeth made to hold gems aren’t too uncommon, and an importer once got past us declaring all his diamonds except the big one inside his glass eye.”

Gavigan looked into the bathroom. “Plumbing?” he asked.

“We took most of it apart; the rest we probed.”

Aldo dealt himself four aces. “*Les flics*,” he said, “*sont formidables*. They miss nothing.”

“And what,” Merlini wanted to know, “was the searching routine on our nimble-fingered friend here?”

“I’ll show you,” Hurley said. “On your feet, wise guy.”

The Cheshire-cat grin that had seemed to be permanently affixed to the magician’s moonlike face vanished abruptly.

“Not the pill again! *Ca, je refuse absolument!*”

“No. We’ll skip the cathartic this time. But start stripping.”

Pierre Aldo put the deck on the floor, scooped up the aces, turned them face down, snapped his fingers, then counted the cards face up. The aces were now kings. He dropped these on the deck, stood up, removed his coat, and began to unknot his tie.

“I do this now three times. Soon I am good enough for the Folies Bergère. Pierre Aldo—*Le Prestidigitateur Nu!*”

The glum customs agent turned the pockets of the coat inside out, then the sleeves. He felt the lining square inch by square inch and tossed the garment to Merlini who did the same. The man's necktie, shirt, undershirt, trousers, shoes, socks, and, finally, his shorts got the same painstaking inspection.

"New heels, I see," Merlini said as he examined the shoes.

"Courtesy of the Customs Service," Hurley explained. "We replaced the ones we cut up."

"You also pay for *les funérailles*," Aldo asked, "when I die from *la pneumonie*?"

Hurley threw him his shorts. Aldo, grinning again now, climbed into them.

"Well?" Hurley eyed Merlini without much hope. "What did we miss?"

"I think," the magician said slowly, "that you saw a little too much. One thing—a small piece of misdirection—made you jump unconsciously to a hasty conclusion."

Hurley didn't believe it. "Are you telling me there is a place we haven't looked?"

"I am. As you said—right under our noses. But first I want to ask a favor. If I'm right, Pierre's next stop will be a Federal prison. Since I may not see him again very soon, I'd like to show him one trick before he goes."

Aldo who had picked up his shirt nearly dropped it. "You are a magician?" He wasn't smiling now.

"I do a little magic," Merlini said. "I liked that poker deal of yours, but I can top it. You shuffle, cut, and deal four bridge hands. I won't touch the cards at all and yet I'll get a perfect hand."

"The bridge?" Aldo said slowly. "I do not know the bridge so well."

"Four players," Merlini told him. "The complete deck is dealt, and a perfect hand is all the cards of one suit. The odds against getting it by chance are 158,753,389,899 to 1."

Aldo sat on the floor again, picked up the deck, and began shuffling slowly. He looked thoughtful. "You want to bet?"

"Sure," Merlini said. "At those odds I can bet you between two and three ten-thousandths of a cent against the missing half million in diamonds."

"I think," Aldo said, "that you lose." He dealt rapidly but stopped after four cards had been dealt to each hand, and turned those faces up in front of Merlini. "How can you get thirteen cards of one suit when the first four are aces?"

"You might give me a square deal," Merlini said. "Suppose I shuffle the cards once first." He held out his hand.

Aldo wasn't interested. "*Non!* The trick is impossible. You are talking through the hat."

George Hurley suddenly lost patience in a battle of magicians that might even have made hocus-pocus history.

He exploded. "You can play games with this character in his cell! I want to know where this hiding place is you say we missed—and right now!"

"Pierre," Merlini said of the French magician, "is much too uninterested in the impossible trick I offered to do; any other magician or gambler would have demanded to see it at once. And why does a card man of his calibre claim to know so little about bridge? Most important, why is he so reluctant to finish dealing out four full hands of bridge?"

"What's so different about bridge?" Hurley asked. "He's been dealing fancy poker hands."

"Yes. Five hands of five cards each. That's less than half the deck. I want to see him deal *the rest of the deck!*"

"The rest of it?" Hurley said. "But...but he's been shuffling that deck all morning." The customs chief reached for the deck and an unsmiling Aldo shrugged and let it go.

"He's been doing card tricks all the time," Merlini went on, "because he didn't want to let the deck out of his hands. The shuffling was the misdirection that made you decide, without really thinking about it, that the deck must be innocent. And yet every trick he did cried out that his shuffle couldn't possibly be legitimate."

When Hurley tried to spread the cards across the floor, half of them stuck solidly together. He picked the solid half of the deck up, inserted a fingernail under the top card, and pulled. It peeled off reluctantly.

"Glued together," Gavigan said, "and hollowed out!"

The tightly packed gems that filled the hole in the half deck blazed brilliantly in the light.

"A perfect hand," Merlini smiled, "in diamonds!"



something new

and different

Do you recall the method of writing used by the late Jack Kerouac? He would put a roll of paper—not individual sheets but a seemingly endless roll—in his typewriter and then click-clack out all the thoughts that came to him on his basic theme; and he would never revise. This spontaneous flow, including whatever his subconscious brought to the surface, became the final, unedited version.

Now, bear in mind that random, impulsive, partly stream-of-consciousness technique when you read Stephen Barr's "Figaro Figaro," which is that rarity in the genre (even these days)—an avant-garde mystery.

An avant-garde mystery? "An insult to the nervous system"? (as Christopher Lehmann-Haupt once wrote in "The New York Times" in connection with avant-garde writing). Something Daliesque, surrealist? Something of "fleeting fantasies," of hallucinations, of the "fringe areas" of our (sub)consciousness? A new shape, an unconventional, untraditional mode and mold? Or, in Mr. Barr's own words, "a modernistic puzzlement . . . poetic improvising"? Yes, all these, in one degree or another, and perhaps more more more

We confess we did not understand most of this story, but we could not stop reading; and the last sentence is a revelation—and a shocker

FIGARO FIGARO

by **STEPHEN BARR**

MURDER IS A FORM OF SUICIDE—IF THEY FIND YOU OUT. AS A matter of fact it is anyway. But what if a king were to lose his head and kill? Or the other way around? For every writer is a king to himself, and one's final act is typical of one's greatness. If you

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have a famous name, be famous; if you cannot be famous, then be infamous. No writer is a hero to his Valhalla

They'd let him have a typewriter after all he was being watched

The man who sat down at their table without being asked to was shorter than the Englishman but taller than the Englishman's wife. He had a color that suggested expensive living and costly sunlight, and he had a self-assurance so complete that the two at the table were unable to speak. This is frequently true of people.

"I am sitting down," the stranger said, then remained silent. The fact was that he sat down. Nothing else.

The Englishman—his name was Grennville—could find no way to argue the fact that it was true.

"Do have a café with us, won't you," said Mrs. Grennville. "Because I always do think that having things together is so awfully nice."

"What?" said the stranger.

Mrs. Grennville looked at him with the look one gives to the blind or to foreigners. "Yes, of course, you don't want coffee. Naturally; you're drunk. Harold, fetch some brandy." She fell on the floor.

"Pick her up," said her husband.

This man, this stranger, did so.

"Should I put her this way? Or this way?"

She was dead.

"Or should I put her this way?" There was a dreadful knowing in his saying this. Grennville looked at her and saw her being dead

Charles Martel pulled the sheet of paper out of the typewriter and put a new one in looked at her and saw her being dead for God's sake, who am I trying to be like? And why Grennville with two n's? Ville is French, a town, everyone knows ville: Pottsville, Melville. But what's with Grenn? Is that the dark knowingness of the Black Forrest put on a Scottish moor? cross out the r, it's only got one, like my own name

"Lay it off," Olivier said. "We speak English, no?" He pushed the king's face over to the left, because barbers are allowed to.

With a razor at your throat they are sometimes more persuasive than armies. Barbarians; barbarians are people without barbarians

"All right. But shouldn't we be talking Latin?"

"No."

"But I thought I was writing something. Wasn't I?"

"No. My name, just in case you've forgotten it, is Olivier. Olivier le Daim."

"Aren't you supposed to be my great-great-grandson's confrère?"

"Compère. But we can skip that. No, I'm always here. D'you want lotion?"

"So it is, always a barber. No, I don't want lotion. Why is it invariably a barber?"

"It isn't. Sometimes it's your mother, but more often it's your nurse. Or your first girl

The man who sat down at their table without being a man who sat down. That was good Latin, no? No. "Tell me, are you related to Figaro?"

"What was that you said, sir?"

"Are you shorter than an Englishman?"

"Yes, if you mean Drake. But not so tall as Maimon. Spit."

Ptah. "I guess I have bad teeth. What's the one called that you're going to pull out? Molar?"

"Molar means mill—the place where they grind. Yes, I'm going to

The stranger having spoken remained silent. He sat down on the drill: the drill was something you can't get away from. Why-why-why-why-

The Englishman, his name was Figaro, could find no way to argue the fact. It was true. That is the fact about facts.

"Spit."

Ptah.

Olivier le Daim: some people spell it Dain. Silly. You want to know what it means, sir? Well, it means Stag. Shall I tell Mrs. Grenville you're here, 'sir? It's a stag party, and I always do think that having stags together is awfully nice.

Must you shave so close to my neck?

I'm only trying to shave your neck, mi lourde. So that the hachette wil no com too close to thi braine. Spit. I be a protester, too, mi kinge

Charles Martel looked at him with the look that one gives to the blind or to foreigners. That's what little boys are made of.

"Do have a coffee with Harold, won't you?"

"You can't possibly mean Harold of England? My dear chap, I knew him at Harrow, or was it Eton? Too-too-too-too. Spit."

I think you mean herald.

"Oc."

"Oc?"

"I said oc. I'm afraid you'll have to stand up now, Sire."

"Oc? That's southern for yes, isn't it? I mean, after all, my father spoke French and he always said oui. Add an L to it and you have my cousin. Without an s."

"You may have him, Sire. Now will you please stand up."

My name is Charles. Martel means that I am a hammer did you know that when my mother died he picked her up? He was a very confusing person. His name was Erikson he married my mother he sailed away to the north country he found the Earth was round

Ptah.

Figaro, Figaro, figaro that beats upon the high shore of this world. Wouldn't shere me like as a lamb? Is the block so easy to the neck that Truth herself must be shorn of her monument?

Now, Sire, be easy for the short time that is left. I am your mother and your father—I am Olivier le Daim, the maker of tents and dreams. Spit.

But Molars? Martello towers? The Hammer of Time that drops as the gentle rain from Heaven to the unknowings I am not Louis I am not the other Charles I am not my cousin I am not I am not I am not

Peace, Sire. We do not speak of these things before the multitude. See, here is Flavia—she wants to talk to you.

Yes, she may. I am in my bath. Why am I always killed in my bath? Tell me that, Figaro.

That will come, Lord.

You mean when I am supposed to be Marat?

Spit. Alas, poor Charlotte, she hated you. She was a woman of infinite disagreement: her very hair stood on end at the thought of anyone being against the Gironde, whose hairs also stood on end. Please remember that you and I are supposed to be human beings. You remember that they have here a phrase: When in Rome I keep forgetting.

That is natural, Sire.

You're a dentist, aren't you?

Yes.

But you seem to be cutting my hair.

That is for surgery, Sire.

Why I am here is a complete mystery to me.

You are alone in that, Sire. There is no mystery.

Have I forgotten something?

Yes, your mission. Spit.

I am right. I am the representative of God—or is it something else? Is it Truth? Why is my brain so clouded?—when I know I must be right because I am of a superior race. My name is Charles. Who is this barber?

Spit. There was a dreadful knowing in his saying this

“Figaro?”

“Yes, Sire.”

“Who am I?”

“You.”

“Me?”

“No, you. And it’s getting a little thin on top—but I don’t think you want to have it brushed over to the side to conceal it. After all, do remember that you and I are superior people. We have come here on—”

“And your name is Figaro?”

“Indeed. As I was saying, we are here on a mission—”

“Are you always a barber?”

“Spit, please.”

Charles Martel stood: the armies of the Sarensens swayed in front of him, and he was pushed back into his chair.

“Why are you shaving my neck?”

“The multitude expects it, Sire.”

“Why do you call me Sire?”

“That is the way it is, dear friend. Why do you call me Figaro? Why is it that every time we come here we make these errors? Must it always be that we insist on absolute law? Just because we are right?”

I am ashamed I am embarrassed I am not right. What is right? Wasn’t I pilate? Wasn’t I the son of my father?

“There is nothing wrong in being the son.”

“My father—”

“You are too wrapt up in your mission. You have no father in the sense that they mean it. Please, you must bare your neck.”

Figaro, figaro: wherefore art thou, Figaro?

You are mixed in your thinking. You are here on a mission,

or so I am told. Spit. You insisted on the name Charles

Charles Martel stood up and the armies of the Sarensens swayed before him again—Sarensens? That was the girl who but we don't speak of proper names

Spit('sBergen)

"I mean to be—" How dreadful to have one's hands tied!

"I am the representative of—" How dreadful to be shouted down!

"I only ask that—" Now I see why my neck is shaved

The man who sat down at their table looked up at the head that the executioner lifted. He raised his glass of wine with a self-assurance so complete that it prevented conversation.

"Do have some chocolate with us, won't you?" said Mrs. Grenn. "Because in faith I do think that one who looks on a head must know its origin. Harold, I entreat you to order some chocolate directly. Who are you?" she said to this person, this man who had climbed down from the scaffold.

"You are Monsieur," she said, and stood up.

"Yes, Madame."

"Then you are Death, are you not?"

"No, Madame. I am called Monsieur because I have taken the head of your lover."

"You must be—" she said, and fell into a kind of faint.

Do we have to go on doing this? Must it always be like this? She had a bronzed look from being at Bath. The Regent had been there at the time and he remarked to his equerries that she must be a gypsy. A dear but stupid man who bent down to help, could he do aught else? When you're in a faint

"Should I put her this way?" the Prince Regent asked. "Or should I put her the other way? Damme, Harold, fetch some brandy!"

"It doesn't matter," said the chaplain.

She hadn't fainted she had died

"Now, dash it, what have I done?" The man put another sheet of paper in the typewriter. "My name is Harold—" he typed, and tore it out

Figaro figaro figaro

The switch is pulled: the first jolt is at 2000 volts

And while we are in an experimental mood let us take three more pages of your time here is another "form" of the mystery-crime story—not avant-garde, like Stephen Barr's, but another striving to break through formula, to extend an old dimension or add a new one a kind of poetic expressionism

These Don Quixote tiltings at technique—Barr's and Malzberg's—are rare in the mystery genre; but whatever influences they may or may not have (and who can measure such things so soon after the fact?), surely we should all, readers and editors, never lock the doors of our minds . . .

BEYOND SLEEP

by BARRY N. MALZBERG

IN THE BED I DREAM THAT I HAVE KILLED MY WIFE, MOVING ON her with an entirety of purpose which somehow vaults past circumstance, past memory, past even desire, the knife held high and gleaming in my hand, her eyes wide and open underneath me, my hand darting to her throat as she realizes—ah, it must be for the very first time—that I am capable of doing it.

"You've wrecked everything," I say to her, "our dreams, our hopes, everything that we worked toward, all illusion of romance, all mystery, all connection, everything dissolved in the hard bright core of your corruptibility"—and then the knife is fully upon her and with a grunt I drive it in and through, past tissue, past bone, into the rotting center of her, and she explodes underneath me like swollen fruit, blood to the side of her, blood on the floor, blood on the matting and sofa, small twists and threads of blood on the ceiling, and she falls away, away from the knife to my feet, and I stand over her poised, triumphant, easy at last but still cautious, cautious.

"There had to be an end to it," I say, "otherwise, you see, it just would have gone on and on and at the end only wreckage or hatred, but now you're free, I'm free, we're torn loose of one

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another"—and indeed it is true; I feel somehow not only free of her but of my own difficult history. It is as if I am no longer the man who killed her but a stronger, more integrated version of the man I was when I married her, and it is a good feeling, a good feeling, because it is almost possible to conceive of going back to the beginning and doing it right—but then I am falling, falling, through layers and levels of sensation, codes seeming to wink to me in lights bouncing off the graying walls and I wake up in my bed, gray on the pillow, gray on the walls, all languid within and turning to confront the place on the bed next to me where my living wife should be

In the cell, after the interrogation, I fall into a thick doze; I dream that I have not killed my wife, not touched her at all but have in that horrid stricken instant the knife between us, and have turned to say, "You wrecked it, you wrecked everything—your *corruptibility*, your selfishness, your nagging have destroyed everything that could have been; but I won't have it any more, I tell you, I won't have it"—and raising the knife between us, the light bounces and flickers off the blade, and then I draw it very quickly, very cleanly across my throat, and blood bubbles.

I can feel my life coming out of me in uneven pulses but there is time enough, time enough to say, "I didn't have the guts, the only person I really could kill was myself and maybe that's the way I always wanted it"—and in her eyes then comes a light of full understanding and she opens her mouth to say something, opens her mouth, for all I know, to issue the words which will grant me peace if not redemption; but it is too late and everything fades from me and everything is very dark and I wake up in the cell, hunched over my stomach, my shoes scrapping into the floor, a clanging of iron down the line, and realize that never, never, as long as I live, will I be able to get hold of this insight again

In the hospital I dream that none of this has happened, that all is blank and gray and protected outside as well as inside. In this dream my wife bends over me, soft and limpid in her best dress, and runs a hand over my forehead and says, "It could have been different, you must believe that it could have been different"—and I reach toward her to hold her and moan my penitence into her ear and tell her that I truly see this now, but I only know about

change that it is always beyond the next turning—which is too late; but before I can tell her this I feel the wrench of exit again and rising, falling, heaving, collapsing, I feel myself moving through all those layers of self into an awakening which I know will be so enormous and final and this time so far beyond the possibility of sleep that I do everything I can to keep it away. And then suspended in some infinite cove of possibility, halfway between dream and meaning, loss and renewal, I turn slowly in the orbit of purposes, as stark and bleak, trapped and isolated, as the spinning face of the moon itself which casts light through the window, summoning me toward the next sleeping tablet ...



A Thomas Walsh story from the "Black Mask" of the mid-thirties, when Mr. Walsh's style was deliberately fashioned in the "Black Mask" manner—metal-hard, terse, harsh, full of sharp, brittle images and reportorial realisms, told in a factual, dead-earnest, unromantic, yet paradoxically romanticized, style, and action-packed every paragraph of the way...

BREAK-UP

by THOMAS WALSH

SIXTY CENTS SHOWED ON THE meter. Starr shoved a dollar through the front window, then opened the cab door and dashed quickly along the sidewalk toward the nearby entrance.

Rain was falling in thick soft sheets—a rain flung in his face by the grip of a gusty wind, with fog dripping through it in long streamers from the gray mass compacted above the street lamps. The dampness in the air made it cold, penetrating, and under it Starr shivered in his light topcoat.

A shower of drops spattered in his face as he neared the apartment entrance. Narrowing his eyes against it, he did not see the woman very clearly. Only the platinum glint of her hair, the instantly gone and tiny brilliance of pearl earrings rotated in arcs by the sweep of her body. She ran past Starr, one arm raised,

and in the road behind him his taxi paused with a skreel of tires on wet concrete.

The man coming fast in back of her wedged a broad shoulder into Starr's chest, knocking him aside. Starr slid on the wet pavement, staggered, caught at him and began in an angry tone, "Where the hell do you think you—"

The man's black homburg jerked from his head, and in the warm glow of light from the lobby beyond, his face showed ugly and hard as he bent for it. He seemed undecided, straightening; his tall broad body came a step toward Starr, hesitated at the woman's voice. She called, "Marty, please," while his eyes, small, bitter between puffed lids, probed at Starr over a quarrelsome, heavy jaw. The woman called again, urgently, nervously, before he turned,

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crossed the pavement, and slammed the taxi door after him.

Starr heard his voice rumbling angrily inside, the lighter tones of the woman, answering. He watched the cab roll up to Fifth and turn right at the corner; then he shrugged, shook water from the brim of his hat, entered the lobby. Here steam hissed faintly in concealed pipes, making the air warm, almost close. Starr saw no one in the hall, though the elevator door was open. He looked into the empty cage, around for the boy, then rested his thumb against the buzzer.

The sound died away and quietness flowed over it. Starr waited. After a minute he lit a cigarette and looked at his watch. Two o'clock. He glanced round again, frowning; one of the operators should be here all night. Queer where—

Starr's eyes, roaming absently over the quiet green and gold of the lobby, halted in their sweep, focused down. He stared for a moment, and silently, at the hand lying palm up on the floor near the wall. The sleeve itself vanished under the shadow of a stone jar; he could see nothing from where he stood but the palm, the limp fingers, a white band of cuff.

Starr said, "What the devil!" in a vague tone. He looked startled. He moved his lips uncertainly, moved his eyes away, then back, squinting.

After an instant he stirred; he crossed the tile floor with hard clicks of his leather heels, passed the huge stone potted plant that had barred his vision, and halted stiffly over the hand. He breathed a word softly, staring down.

He could see the man's upturned face well enough—the motionless oval of it pale in the shadow of the plant base. A head narrow, small, above a slender body, with features that death had twisted and left wrenched, but cold, grave, and set sternly in a thin contortion of mouth. The eyes were wide, blank, the body rigid; a bullet hole above its right ear had bled a little, and the blood had gathered around the edges in a jagged circle that was now almost black.

Starr rose from his knees. The cigarette was still in his mouth and the smoke from it curled upward to his eyes and stung them. He felt uncertain, angry; the silence annoyed him. It seemed to have a humming sound far down that mingled with the beating of his heart and grew louder as it deepened. The sound grew painful, throbbed in his ears. He went back to the elevator and pressed the buzzer insistently.

No one came.

Against the thickly curtained outer doors the rain spattered in a metallic burst. Starr returned to the dead man and looked down at him thoughtfully, rubbing the

jut of his chin. He swore in a puzzled voice, without much emotion. Then he crossed the wedge of shadow behind the elevator shaft, and stopped at the switchboard just in back. He plugged in a line there, spoke briefly to the operator.

He smoked another cigarette while he waited. No one else entered or left; from the apartments above he could hear no stir. Occasionally a nighthawk cab hissed by, and the sounds of its passage droned off into quietness in the space of three breaths. Starr felt lonely, chilled; he looked back once or twice at the limp hand. Presently a siren moaned thinly outside, faded under the whining of brakes. Starr opened the door.

A tall thin man, dapperly dressed and brisk-toned, swung out from a car as it stopped. Four others followed him—the two last, Starr saw, in uniform. The tall man said, "Service entrance, Mac. Bottle it up till I see you. Take the door, Marino. Kiv and Barrett, come with me." His long legs clipped quickly across the walk. When he was past Starr he took off his gray fedora, shook water from it, said, "Cripes, what a night."

He had a lean face, pale, swift-moving eyes. Starr nodded toward the stone jar. "I called you," he said. "It's back there."

The pale eyes swept over him, followed his nod. They all crossed

the lobby. When they reached the body the tall man bent slightly from the waist, peering.

Starr went on, "I couldn't find the elevator boy when I came in. Then I saw this fellow's hand sticking out from the plant. I walked over, of course. When I found what was wrong I called you immediately."

Pale eyes turned and looked over the lobby, over Starr. He asked the plain-clothesman on his right, "See what he's got, Kivlehan, will you? Don't mess him up more than you can help."

The detective knelt down. Starr, watching him, said, "I lease 14C in this building. I think this fellow lived here; at least I've seen him several times on the elevators. He—"

Kivlehan looked sidewise up from the dead man, interrupted him with a rising inflection of surprise in his voice. "Brant, this stiff's Doc Williamson. You know that?"

"Yeah." The tall man's tone was impatient. "I told you see what he's got."

"I just asked," Kivlehan said. He bent again.

Brant turned, sliding his glance around the entrance. He walked over to the elevator, looked inside, came back whistling tunelessly between stretched lips. Stopping before Starr, he took a cigarette from his case and lit it without offering any. He took a deep

inhalation; twin streams of smoke funneled from his nose, spurted from his mouth in blueish balls between his words.

"You're not here long, mister? Say two o'clock?"

"Two o'clock," Starr agreed. "I looked at my watch." He hesitated slightly. "Of course I don't know if it would have anything to do with this—"

"What wouldn't?" Brant said. His eyes were bright, interested.

Starr shrugged. "Two people left here as I came in. I'd never seen either of them before. All I can tell you of the woman is that she had platinum hair. The man with her almost knocked me down. They seemed in a good bit of a rush; nervous, too, I thought. At least the woman."

"Uh-huh," Brant said. He squinted absently at the elevator mirror. "You'd know them again?"

"I'd know the man," Starr said.

"Well—" Brant rose as one of the plain-clothesmen came over—"that's just fine, mister. You go on upstairs now. We'll let you know tomorrow what we want. Maybe you'd look at some pictures for us, pick out this bird if you see him."

"Glad to," Starr said. He didn't move.

Brant nodded, smiled, turned from him. "Barrett," he called. "Get the super up here. I guess he'll have the apartment back of

the elevator. Tell him bring his passkeys."

Kivlehan got up from the dead man and handed him some things. Starr saw a pinseal wallet, some letters, a visiting card with the name faced away from him. He watched Brant, interested.

"Not much," the tall man said. "No rod, Kiv?"

Kivlehan shook his head. "They say Doc didn't carry one. He kept a cowboy at his place downtown."

"Cowboy," Brant said, shaping his mouth thoughtfully. He tapped the card against lean fingers, watched Kivlehan. "You got no idea who it was?"

Kivlehan's dark eyes jerked away sullenly. He said, "I got the idea you have. Marty Connors had the job. Maybe—"

Starr cut in excitedly, dropping a hand to Brant's arm. "This fellow I saw leaving—the woman called him Marty. I'd forgotten that until I heard the name."

Kivlehan and Brant looked at him, at each other. Then the tall man sighed, putting the things in his pocket. He said to Starr, "The fellow you saw looked like what?"

"Pretty tall," Starr answered. "Around thirty, thirty-two. A bit fat, not too much. Dark hair, dark eyes. He—"

"All right," Brant said, almost irritably. He tapped a finger against his front teeth and stared over their heads. Presently he nodded twice, slowly, and rolled

his pale eyes down to Kivlehan. "I guess you better pick Connors up, Kiv."

"I always get the nice job," Kivlehan said bitterly. His thick brows, dark against a long, very pale face, drew together as he turned to Starr. "Tell us something about yourself. Who and what are you? Live here, don't you?"

"Only when I'm off duty, on shore leave," Starr replied to the last question first. "I'm second officer on a private yacht—D. L. Logan's. She's kept in commission the year round. This season we're mostly in the East—New York. I keep a room here—use it when I can. Before that, I saw service overseas—Naval reserve—destroyer."

"Uh-huh. Then you know what law means, and what ought to be done with lawbreakers, especially when there's a murder—huh?"

"I'll see this through—if that's what you mean."

"That's what I mean. Now, suppose I ask you to look at a man—you'd know for sure if he was the one went out of here?"

Starr nodded. "Yes."

Brant grew brisk again. "You take the car, Kiv. But send it back soon's you can. I may be needing it."

The third detective came from behind the elevator with a middle-aged man in blue pants, slippers,

and pajama shirt. Starr recognized him as the superintendent; he appeared sleepy, bewildered. When he saw the body in the corner he gulped and stared at it with popping eyes.

Brant went over and took his arm. They vanished behind the plant. Kivlehan growled, "Come on," and went before Starr to the door.

Outside the rain had stopped, but the air was still damp, cold. Street lamps shone in the fog like burnished drops of gold. They got into the squad car and Kivlehan gave the driver an address on Sixty-fourth Street. He didn't speak again during the ride.

They stopped, and the driver asked, "Do I wait?"

Kivlehan said, "No," shortly, and climbed a stoop of gray stone before him. Past the outer doors of glass there was an inner vestibule, lit faintly by a ceiling bulb ensconced in a globe of green glass. Kivlehan pushed one of the bells and waited.

When the release sounded they entered a dark hall and climbed two flights of stairs. A big man watched them from the landing, his body framed against the yellow glow from a doorway. The light was behind him, and Starr could not see his face.

He cried as they came up, "Well, Kiv, you old sonofagun. Where you been hidin' all this time? Come in, come in."

Kivlehan said, "Hello, Marty," quietly. They went into a large room and the big man closed the door behind them, turned around rubbing his hands. He didn't seem to recognize Starr.

Kivlehan snapped a match to his cigarette, fanned out the spark carefully. He spoke scowling down at it, lips pursed out. "You still with Doc Williamson, Marty?"

The big man boomed, "Sure," heartily. Looking at Starr he appeared puzzled, genial. "I don't know your friend, Kiv. Any of you want a drink?"

Kivlehan looked up, caught Starr's nod as the big man crossed to the table. He said, staring at the broad back, "He thinks he met you, Marty, about an hour ago, leaving a house on Seventy-fourth Street." He dropped his match to the rug by separating thumb and forefinger. "Then he went inside and found Doc Williamson croaked in the lobby."

Marty Connors didn't turn at once. He rolled a ball of Scotch around in his glass, squinted at it against the light, drank. Over the rim his eyes, careful now and quite blank, regarded Starr. Then he put down the glass and said, "Uh-uh," shaking his head. "This lad's mixing faces, Kiv. You don't think I've turned killer?"

"I don't think anything," Kivlehan answered. "Only Brant wants to see you about it, Marty."

Connors' cheeks puffed out. He repeated tonelessly, "Brant wants to see me? I should jump at that. I don't hop bells for him now."

Kivlehan shrugged. He looked at the big man without saying anything.

"You know that," Connors went on. He tapped one finger against his chest and his heavy face lines drooped, became sullen. "Brant didn't give me a break, Kiv. You know that, too. Brant to me spells louse."

Kivlehan moved uncomfortably. He growled, "Lay off, Marty. He did what he could; we all did. Don't blame Brant."

"Blame me," Connors said. His voice grew louder and bitterness pooled in the small eyes, the dissipated mouth. "I'm the first dick that ever gets drunk, huh? Brant don't drink; you don't. Not a damn one of you knows what liquor smells like. Hell!" He pushed out savagely from the table. "It's a laugh, Kivlehan. I take the rap for you all. For a crummy bunch of heels without guts enough—"

Kivlehan repeated in an edged voice, "Lay off, Marty."

"You don't make me," the big man said. His mouth, his eyes, were ugly, his head thrust forward. "Now I dance for Brant? Like hell, Kivlehan. A copper don't mean nothing to me; not now, not you. If Brant wants to talk, he comes here."

"Then I'll have to take you," Kivlehan said quietly.

Connors drew his body away a pace, stood up very straight, though with his arms bent a little. He didn't answer. When Kivlehan began to cross to him he shifted his right arm under his vest and metal gleamed bluely as he brought it out. The gun swung in a short arc, slowly, from Starr to Kivlehan. He said, "If you want it, copper."

"What the hell's the matter with you?" Kivlehan growled. His dark, cold eyes glanced at Starr, faced back. He seemed perplexed, unsure. "You know you're just making it tougher for yourself, Marty. For me, I—"

"Yeah?" Connors came forward and stopped before the smaller man. Shreds of light in his narrowed eyes glittered like glass, in small sharp slivers of white flame.

"You big ape," Kivlehan said. He was grinning suddenly. "Tryin' to nerve yourself up to it? Marty, Marty. A guy would think you meant it. Brant don't figure you in on this; I don't. We just—"

The big man's arm flashed up and down. Before Kivlehan could move, the gun barrel cracked on to his skull, and he fell to the floor limply and without sound. Connors breathed fast, heavy. Watching Starr, he jerked the gun. "Over here," he said.

Starr followed the barrel and

stopped when his back was against the wall. Connors glanced around, wetting his lips. He made three strides to a closet door, grasped the knob, and jerked the gun again, inward. "Face first," he said. "Don't turn."

Starr went in, waited, heard behind him dragging sounds. He felt a limp body crush into his leg and slide off to the floor. Darkness swept over him; a key was turned. After a space, muted, the door in the outer room clicked.

He bent and propped Kivlehan's limp body up against the wall, stepped over him, and felt for the lock. On this side it was only a small metal box screwed into the wood; there was no catch to open. A whitish streak of light lined the door edge, allowing Starr to make out the slender steel rod that was shot from door to wall slot. He swayed back on his feet, lunged forward, and crashed his shoulder against the door; at his third lunge the rod snapped. He pushed back the door and went out.

There was nobody in the living room, though the lights were still on. After a glance Starr crossed it to a corridor at one end, where the gleaming whiteness of a tile bath showed at the side. There he sopped a towel in cold water, went back to Kivlehan, and lugged him to a sofa in the living room. The bruise itself was swollen,

ugly, but there wasn't much blood showing. Starr dripped the water on him, fetched a bottle from the table, and forced some whiskey down his throat.

Presently Kivlehan muttered, "I'm all right." His eyes opened, and then winced shut from the light; he passed one hand tenderly over his scalp. After a while he asked harshly, "How long's he gone?"

"Five minutes," Starr answered. "He locked us in the closet there and I was forced to smash the lock."

Kivlehan shot a dull glance at the door and got unsteadily to his feet. "A copper turned rat," he said. "Bad, mister. I didn't figure he'd pull anything like that on me. When he was on the force we teamed together. I—" He stopped, shook his head, looked miserable.

Starr gave him a small drink of the Scotch.

After a silence he asked, "You think that he killed Williamson?"

Kivlehan moved his shoulders irritably. "How the hell would I know that?" His somber glance slid around the room without any case in it. "The girl with him had something to do with it; if we knew who she was, where he dropped her, there'd be something to work on."

Starr looked thoughtful for a moment. Then he said, "There's a taxi stand on Forty-first, near

Broadway. I took a cab from there tonight coming home. When I left it at the apartment Connors and the girl got in. I think I'd recognize the driver. If we went down there and got hold of him—"

Kivlehan snarled, "Hell! It's time you told me that." He grabbed for his hat, shot a cold, disgusted look at Starr, said, "Come on, come on. It's a murder rap, mister."

They got a taxi on Madison Avenue. As it started off, Starr said, "I'm trying to get things straight. This Connors isn't with you any more?"

"No," Kivlehan said. "He liked his liquor too much. You might have read something in the papers when it happened."

"I don't think I did," Starr said.

Kivlehan shrugged moodily. "Well, Connors passed out in a bar one night; two chisels who happened to be around rolled him for his service revolver. Then they spring a holdup on the place and let the guy have it when he shows fight. They're grabbed in a taxi ten minutes later, still carrying Connors' gun. The papers raised hell, of course; there was nothing the Chief could do but bounce Connors hard."

He slapped one fist into the palm of his other hand without any force. "Not that Marty wasn't a good dick—but what the hell could anybody do for him in a

spot like that? Brant felt bad; we all did. It was just one of those things no one could help. Still, Marty seemed to pull out of it all right; I never heard him squawk until tonight. And he got along good, too; Doc Williamson—the lad you found back there—took him on as cowboy for his place.”

Starr, puzzled, asked, “Cowboy?”

“Guard,” Kivlehan explained. “Doc and a gambler named Max Schale ran a gambling house downtown. A nice joint, with plenty of money around. That made them need somebody to keep the cheap guns away—one stickup kills a place like that—and Marty Connors had a hard rep. So they took him on to stop trouble. He looked the boys over, kept out the heist men, choked off squawks. A guy in his senses didn’t argue much with Connors. Tough, mister.”

They left the taxi at Forty-first Street. Walking westward, Starr saw by the clock on the Paramount Building that it was twenty past three. Traffic had almost ceased; in the deserted streets vague sounds rumbled, vague shadows moved. Rain was falling again in a thin drizzle, placidly, and without wind. It was quite cold.

When they came to the stand there were three taxis in line, and Starr saw his driver in the second.

Kivlehan questioned him—a bony-faced little man with a long jaw and a Third Avenue accent. He remembered the couple: Sure, he’d dropped the dame in West Eighty-nint’, taken the fella to the East Side. Sisty-fort’, Sisty-fift’. Hadn’t had a call since. Somethin’ the matter, buddy?

Kivlehan said, “No,” shortly told him to wait, crossed with Starr to the steamy closeness of a diner near the corner.

They both had coffee. Starr smoked a cigarette and had a second cup while Kivlehan used the phone. Coming back, the long pale face was lined deeply, grim-set around the mouth.

He told Starr, “They just found the elevator boy in Williamson’s apartment. He says Connors came in around one and went up there. Then an hour later the bell rings and the kid takes the car up. He says Connors pulled him out when the door opened and smacked him on the head. He didn’t see any girl.”

Starr remained silent. Kivlehan’s dark eyes brooded absently without seeing him, and he said at last, “You can be wrong on guys. Marty Connors...” He paused, added, “Well,” tiredly paid for the coffee. “We’ll see where the girl got off. He must have headed for there.”

They left the diner, went back to the taxi driver, and told him to shove off.

Cross streets were empty now, dark. In the softly falling drizzle, lights were haloed by solid gray cushions of fog, and ahead of them mist steamed in thin lazy wreaths from the rain-blackened road. Starr shivered; he felt dismal and cold. At his side Kivlehan clenched big hands between his knees, stared down at them silently during the ride. When the cab stopped he got out before Starr.

The driver got out with them and looked around, scratching his head. "I dunno just which one it is, buddy. Somewhere along here, this side. The guy don't give me no address, only says where to stop. These joints look alike to me."

"Big help," growled Kivlehan. He turned and faced the buildings, muttering.

Starr saw a line of apartments, tall, graystoned, canopied, stretching back of them. The driver walked uncertainly up and down, came back repeating, "I dunno. It's one of these three; in the middle of the block is all I remember."

Kivlehan spelled: "D-o-p-e," looking at Starr. "Get his name and pin a tag on him so he don't get lost going back."

The driver stuck out his chin, looked Kivlehan up and down.

"A wise guy," he said. "So suppose you find it yourself, Houdini." He spat in the gutter,

stared back at them, spat again, and drove off mumbling. Kivlehan stalked across the sidewalk to a darkened entrance door, kicked on the metal strip below the glass until a sleepy elevator man in uniform opened it, yawning.

Kivlehan scowled thick brows at him. "You take a womar upstairs an hour ago? A platinum blonde?"

"Miss Carter," the man said. "She came in, yes, sir." He yawned again. "You want Miss Carter?"

Kivlehan said sourly, "You guess, stupid," and pushed past him. The elevator man looked frightened, blinked at Starr, said "Yes, sir," hurriedly, without any reason. Running the cage up, he kept his big eyes away from Kivlehan's sly stare.

They got off at the ninth floor and followed the elevator man's extended arm to the door labeled F. Kivlehan put his revolver in his right hand, and his hand inside his coat. From the elevator the operator watched them; when Kivlehan looked back at him he ducked quickly behind the door closed it. Kivlehan pushed the bell. His face was pale, hard lumped muscle ridging the line of his jaw. He stared steadily at the quiet brown sheen of the door panel until it drew back.

Then he said, "Hold it, Con nors," in a level voice utterly cold and stepped in, shoving the door

back with his left palm. After him Starr entered a long livingroom lit by the shaded glow of floor lamps. Connors stood to one side, big body motionless, big head lowered, and behind him a woman in a blue satin robe cried, "Gawd!" hysterically, as she rose from a couch.

Connors moved, very slightly, his weight teetering forward on his feet, and Kivlehan, watching him, seemed to compact his body to a rigid intensity of stillness, with the gun lifted away, level, from the side of his chest. He didn't speak.

Connors laughed, a little forced, relaxed, turned to the woman. Starr saw she was nicely built, a shade too plump, with terrified eyes over too-white cheeks, too-crimson lips. Mascara emphasized grotesquely the thin fringe of lashes that swept in panic to Connors, to Starr, to Kivlehan. Her cigarette fell to the floor without her looking at it, without, Starr thought, her knowing it. The faded, babyish face became wide, white, stupefied with fright.

Kivlehan said in the dead, cold tone, "Let's get pleasant. Sit down. You, Connors."

For an instant the big man didn't move; his sullen, small eyes watched Kivlehan silently. Then the woman sat down, passing a hand back dazedly over her silver hair, and at her soft moan Connors crossed to her, patted her

arm. "It's all right, Luce," he said.

Kivlehan answered, "Not for you it isn't." He balanced his lean frame on the arm of a chair, let the gun droop down to his thigh, and spoke to Starr without turning his head. "This the woman was with him?"

She half rose, gasping, "No—no." Her body, her head quivered, and Starr saw the gleaming loop of pearl earrings in the motion. He told Kivlehan, "I'm pretty sure it is."

On the couch beside her Marty Connors shifted, reached for the phone at his left. "You don't take me for a sucker, Kivlehan? We're getting Barrett for counsel. You got questions to ask, wait for him."

"Don't touch it," Kivlehan said. "I'm telling you, Connors. You turned out a cheap gun and I'm treating you like one. Pal stuff is through. The mark don't come off easy when you rat. You—" he pointed the gun, face calm, detached—"ratted like you ratted on Doc Williamson. You see Brant first, you and the girl; then you get your mouthpiece."

The big man's hand stopped moving; he turned his face over his shoulder, and Starr saw that it was very white. He said, "You don't mean it, Kivlehan. You wouldn't croak me."

Kivlehan said, "Don't touch the phone."

The big man moved back

slowly, puffed features stolid. His movement was stiff, tense. At his side the girl whimpered quietly, choked sounds without much volume to them.

Kivlehan disregarded her. He crossed to the phone, picked it up in his left hand, called a number. When he got it he asked for Brant. Connors watched him with his small ugly eyes, mouth corners drawn in an inverted U across the heavy cheeks. Starr sat down in a chair with its back to the door, his body tired, his mind wrapped in the dry fatigue of sleeplessness.

The floor lamps and the heated, close air made him drowsy; he shook his head to clear it, got up, lit a cigarette. Turning to drop the match in an ashtray he saw a man in the doorway, open now, that led to the hall; a tall man with lean cheeks shaded by the brim of his hat, and a revolver in his right hand.

Starr stopped moving when the man beckoned slightly with the gun; his arm that had half raised to Kivlehan dropped back to his side. There was a second man behind the first, and he came forward soundlessly, fast, across the thick rug.

At the phone Kivlehan said, "Brant? I got Marty Connors and the girl he left with. Send a car around to pick—" The second man's arm rose, fell, and Kivlehan went sprawling across the couch,

then collapsed from its side to the floor.

Standing at the door, the tall man felt behind him, clicked the knob, and stepped carefully forward, over Kivlehan's body, to the middle of the room. He said, "Pick up the phone, Johnny. The elevator man said you had visitors, Luce. I figured coppers, so I used my key. What's it about?"

The blonde got up, sobbing, ran to him. "They saw us leaving Doc's place, Max—Marty and me. I don't know how they found out where we were; they just got here a few minutes ago."

Max had a lean grayish face, almost square; his mouth was harsh, straight, compressed but wide in the angle of his jaws. He spoke without moving it much, impatiently.

"Okay, okay. Brant'll trace the call and be here roaring. We'll have to move. Connors, you and Johnny handle the dead duck. This other lad a copper?"

"He lives in Doc's house," Connors said. "Kivlehan brought him along to make the identification. He's the one saw us leaving."

The tall man grinned without pleasantness, said, "That makes it very nice, Marty. He's the only one that spotted you?"

The woman sobbed, "Yes."

"All right," Max clipped. "Stop your bawling and get dressed, Luce. You ready, Marty?"

Connors grunted, raised Kivlehan's limp form, and held it to him with one arm around the waist. Johnny picked up his hat, crumpled it rakishly on his head. Luce came out of the bedroom wrapped in a fur coat, pulling a small hat over her hair.

Max said, "I guess we're set." He glanced around briefly. "You," he told Starr, "go out nice, quiet. Don't squawk to the elevator man; he can't do anything for you. Start the parade, Johnny."

Starr went out after the other man and walked behind him to the shaft. Max and the girl were a step behind, then Connors came with Kivlehan. Johnny pressed the signal button; during the short wait none of them spoke. Starr watched the arrow indicator swing smoothly from the lowest notch to nine.

The operator opened the door, watched them uneasily as they went in, staring from Starr to Kivlehan to the girl. Doors slid by, black numbers: four, three, two. At the street level Johnny got off first, and the rest followed.

Before the building a sleek four-door sedan was parked. Far down near the corner a milk horse clip-clopped tiredly; there was nothing else moving in the street—no sound until a distant moaning sigh soared to a scream.

The tall man cursed. He shoved Starr inside the car, followed him,

and Johnny climbed in through the other door. Marty Connors, moving quickly, dumped Kivlehan across their laps; then he and the girl got in the front. The siren sound died under the throaty purr of the motor as they slid away from the curb and turned in at Sixth.

At Seventy-second Street Max touched Connors' shoulder. "Pull in, Marty. We're dropping Luce." He handed the girl a key. "Go up to my place and stay there till we get back. Use the subway. No cab."

Turning, the blonde's face was tear-smudged, snuffly. She whimpered, "It's all right for you. You were smart enough to go out alone. But Marty and—"

Max's hand flicked up, spread a sharp surge of red over the whiteness of her cheek. He said viciously, "You damn little fool!" and slapped her again, a third time, hard blows that rocked her head from side to side. Cowering, she fumbled for the door catch, caught it, stumbled out.

Marty Connors looked back, his nostrils widened a little and his heavy face dark, sullen. He said, "You pulled a pretty fast one, Schale."

"So what?" the tall man said. His voice was arrogant, loud; he sneered a little. "You're in this up to your neck, Connors. You're stayin' in it. This guy spotted you and Luce—now he knows I was

there too. So there's one out. You see that, don't you?"

Connors swung the car east through a side street, north along Central Park. The tall man leaned forward, smiling, his cheeks like carved bronze, his eyes tawny, metallic. He insisted, "You see that, Connors? Rid of him, Barrett beats the case; we'll shush the elevator guy, get Luce out of the city before they grab her. That makes everything fine."

Connors' voice was contained, quiet. "I see it, Max. Where you heading for?"

"Queensboro Bridge," Max said. "And watch yourself, Marty; maybe you're clean now, but you don't stay that way and leave me holding the bag. After tonight we're all pals—you, me, Luce, Johnny. No one got a rap to hang on the other. That's what I want you to see."

Connors grunted, stared ahead. He circled the wheel at the Seventy-ninth Street tunnel, straightened it, and took the curves fast, skidding a little. Starr's body was cold, tensed; he could feel the revolver in Max's pocket prod into his side at a bump. He held his hands stiffly on his knees, and his heart missed in slow jerks, seemed to swell. They came out of the tunnel, across Fifth, and purred through graying streets washed cold with dawn.

Kivlehan moaned on the floor, stirred, and the man Johnny lean-

ed down, slapped the back of his head. He said, "Don't be impatient, guy. You won't have long to wait."

Max looked at him, his lips creasing back soundlessly in the weak light. Connors didn't speak.

From Second Avenue they turned left onto the bridge. For an instant as the car slid up the low incline Starr saw the huge stone blocks of lower Manhattan floating in the fog-like castles of darker vapor behind them; then they faded, the gray wall drew them in, and the car fled fast, with its soft purr, over the black road. Connors didn't speak.

On the Queens side they sloped off the bridge. No lights showed in the vague buildings, street lamps grew infrequent; the streets were deserted of traffic, of men. Houses blurred by, each exactly alike; they appeared to Starr fantastic, like the monotonous repetition of scenery in an animated cartoon. Johnny laughed nervously, at short intervals, addressed Max, and the tall man's voice was calm, easy, but metal-hard. He lit a cigarette, gave Starr one, lit it for him, the tawny eyes glittering with a cold amusement. Connors still didn't speak.

Later they swung out to a narrow road, with empty lots on both sides. The windows of a lunch wagon gleamed dully, drew even, and swept by. Houses became rarer, and the road grew

rough, bumpy; it narrowed and trees darkened it, while on the right a wide field floated back to them with scattered flames burning on its dark expanse.

Max said, "Here, Marty," and the big man slowed, turned the car in over three ruts, jerking them all up and down. After he stopped it Johnny got out first, then Starr; Max and Marty Connors lifted Kivlehan.

The acrid smell of scorched rubbish bit into Starr's nostrils, for even in the drizzle small fires smoldered in the uneven mounds of refuse. Squashy litter made his footing uncertain, and Max slipped once under the burden of Kivlehan's body. He got up cursing, the side of his brown coat covered with a dirty smear.

They propped Kivlehan up against the side of the car, with his lank hair drooping forward and his long pale face pain-stricken and bewildered. He turned his head laboriously from one to the other, spoke in a thick, indistinguishable mutter. Starr could not understand what he said. Staring down at him, hands buried in the loose drape of his coat, Connors didn't speak.

Max stepped out from the car, back, and a little away. He was watching Connors. "You"—he jerked the gun at Starr—"turn around, walk back. Take Kivlehan, Johnny. I guess we're ready."

But he was still watching Connors, and he didn't seem to notice when Starr remained motionless. Kivlehan gripped the hub, tried to raise himself. He was still talking.

From the other side of the car Johnny said, "Okay, boss. No cars." He came briskly around, gun swinging in his hand.

Connors moved, spoke in a choked, fast rush of words. He said, "Wait a minute, Max. Kivlehan—"

"Kivlehan goes," Max said. His voice was low, thin, piercing. His tall body was crouched a little; the gun swept to Connors; he moved back slightly on his left foot, facing him, facing Starr. "You don't pull that stuff, Marty. It's too late. You come in with us now—with me, with Johnny. Or else you go out with Kivlehan."

Connors' eyes faced him, not afraid, but streaked darkly, tormented. He said thickly, "Not Kivlehan, Max."

The tall man stepped away. He made a faint motion of his head to Johnny and in the same instant flame spurted from his hand. Connors staggered.

Something large, something dark, shot forward and clutched the tall man's knees. He dropped, still firing. During a moment of paralysis Starr looked down at Kivlehan's pale face, at the thick brows twisted, writhing. Connors'

big bulk slid down behind the car and Johnny ran to it, gun belching in yellow bursts. Then he saw Starr; he turned, sliding a little with his sudden stop, arms spread out for balance.

The slide gave Starr the moment he needed. Plunging, his fist knocked down Johnny's gun hand, his arm locked round his neck. Shots roared, two, three—how near in the confusion of his mind Starr could not judge—and someone cried, "Ahhh," drawn-out, agonized. Then he crashed down, Johnny above him, and a gun roared again, harshly, and only once.

Johnny stopped struggling; he shivered as though he were cold. He fell sidewise and softly, and his body stopped moving, his face smoothed out. It seemed to Starr that he wanted to say something, but he only made a clumsy, faint motion with his hand. Starr pushed his weight away and got up.

From the car Kivlehan gave him a ghastly smile; Connors was there too, standing, and asking in an anxious voice, "You're all right, Kiv?"

"Sure," Kivlehan said. "I'm all right, Marty. I thought maybe Max brushed you with his first one."

Before the car and a little to its right, Starr saw Max Schale very still, with his head face up and his fine coat covered with dirt. His hat was crushed under

him, and his carefully combed hair fell forward over his eyes; rain fell on the lean cheeks and he did not wipe it away. He looked smaller in death, lighter, older.

Marty Connors laughed. "Hell, no. Max had no guts for a gunman. Not unless he gave it to you in the back, like he croaked Williamson."

Kivlehan got up tiredly. He asked, "Put it together, Marty, will you?"

Connors coughed, choked the sound with his hand. "Not much to tell, Kiv. I called for Doc every evening around one and brought him down to the place. He carried some money and he wanted protection. When I got there tonight I found him stiff on the floor, and Luce Carter just leaving. She tells me Doc tried to beat her, and she grabbed a gun from his pocket and shot him in the scuffle. I was too stupid to think Doc never handled a rod.

"She was pretty hysterical, and afraid the elevator man would notice her face going out. So I rang for him and put him away when he came up. Then I carried Doc downstairs and left him where he'd be found easy; we wanted to make it look like he was shot as he was leaving."

He coughed again.

Kivlehan's face was still puzzled. "Then how do you figure Max Schale killed him?"

"Luce spills it in the car when

we're coming out here. She says something about Max going out before her and leaving her there. I could read things then, of course. Max and Doc were sore at each other over her, and Max must have come up tonight and found them together. I was dumb enough to believe Luce's yarn and try to keep her out of it; she must have been afraid Max would kill her if she told the truth. So I slugged you back there. Kiv, to give her a chance to get out of town. And I felt like hell about it."

Kivlehan growled, "You ought to." He turned to Starr. "How do you feel, mister? Able to drive?"

"Fine," Starr said. "I'll take it in."

Kivlehan flipped his cigarette thoughtfully at Max Schale. "Dump heap," he said. "Don't they call that poetic, mister?" He got in the back with Connors; Starr took the wheel.

Ten minutes later they reached Queens Boulevard. Marty Connors said, "I'll get in faster by train. You don't mind, Kiv?"

"Don't be a chump," Kivlehan growled. "I want to talk to you. Brant will too. Maybe he can get the Commissioner—"

"Nix, nix," Connors said. Getting out. Starr thought his face

was very pale, his grin crooked, forced. "I got an easy life now; no coppers' ties and three times the dough. You're a sucker to stick."

Kivlehan mumbled something. In the mirror Starr saw him looking at the big man, thin nose wrinkled between his brows.

"So long," Connors said. "I'll be seeing you." Then he coughed again; he stepped away from the car hurriedly and fell flat on his face. His ugly head rolled a little on the pavement, his eyes lost some of their bitterness. He said, "Kiv—"

Kivlehan wiped the blood away from Connors' lips and opened his coat, but there was nothing else he could do. Starr wondered how the big man had walked so far with that hole in his chest; he thought of the first shot Max fired, before he went down.

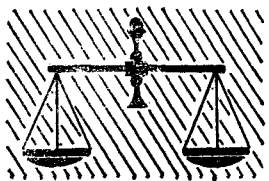
"Listen," Kivlehan said. "You're not turning lily? You're not fainting on me, Marty?"

Starr said quietly, "He hasn't fainted."

But Kivlehan didn't look at him. He kept insisting, "Listen. Marty. All the boys will want to see you; Brant will, too. He'll get the Commissioner to fix things up. Everything will be fine, Marty."

Connors didn't speak





THE JURY BOX

by **JOHN DICKSON CARR**

As I prepare this November column at the beginning of August, the pressure of heat outside an air-conditioned study seems to invalidate any suggestion that 1970 can be nearing its close. And yet such is the case. When I became *EQMM*'s critic almost two years ago, more than one friend prophesied doom.

"You'll be a target," I was warned, "for half the letter-writing cranks in this country. They'll bawl you out, scream at you, tell you your judgments are crazy or crooked or both."

Well, that prophecy failed to materialize. On the contrary, all letters here received have been literate, intelligent, and perceptive; they were much appreciated. But it does bring to mind a long-past incident not without overtones of comedy.

The most explosive book-reviewing uproar of my experience occurred in London towards the end of the nineteen thirties, and involved a left-wing sage who each week pontificated for the *Evening Standard*. Though it's to be hoped that since then he has been eaten by bears, like those children who mocked the prophet, yet the man may still be alive; not to rouse old wars, let's give him the pseudonym of Richmond Fall.

Trouble began with his notice of a detective novel, *Hercule Poirot's Christmas*, by Agatha Christie. Not content merely with damning *Hercule Poirot's Christmas*, the pundit disclosed (1) the identity of the murderer, (2) the murderer's motive, (3) nearly every detail of the trick by which the crime had been committed, (4) how the detective knew it.

Repercussions soon followed. The next day, foaming with rage, Anthony Berkeley phoned me to ask questions. Had I seen this outrage in the *Standard*? As honorary secretary of the Detection Club, would I take it lying down? Write to the newspaper; answer that so and so at once!

It was done. In restrained terms I pointed out that, while a critic must say what he likes about the merits of any book, it's not quite the clean potato carefully to give away secrets on whose effect its author so much depends.

My protest triggered a real blast from Richmond Fall. Our pundit, thoroughly roused, dealt with the challenge by ignoring it and attacking along another line. Though he knew the rules, he said, this trash called detective fiction was a nuisance, a bore, an affront to readers' intelligence; he'd do anything to swat such rubbish.

Your correspondent could retire; others entered the fray for what became an embittered slanging-match between those who liked detective fiction and those who hated it. Despite a timely contribution from Dorothy Sayers, reminding everybody that the point at issue was not the worth of mysteries but how they should be reviewed, most combatants on both sides also forgot the point.

After all, there is a historic parallel. That row suggests the occasion, an eighteenth-century literary event afterwards described by Sir Walter Scott, when Dr. Samuel Johnson met the Scottish economist, Adam Smith. Dr. Johnson called Adam Smith a liar; Adam Smith called Dr. Johnson a son of a bitch. This, so far as we know, was the only recorded exchange between the great lexicographer and the author of *The Wealth of Nations*.

Descending to no opprobrious epithets, scattering flowers all the way, I can report on four straight detective stories, alternately British and American, each of sound construction and entire fair play. The first three are new; the fourth, published a few years ago, has now reappeared in paperback.

In *Wobble to Death*, by Peter Lovesey (Dodd, Mead, \$4.50), the foggy gaslight of 1879 illumines one of those brutal Victorian sporting events, the six-day indoor walking race or 'wobble,' in which athletes achieved miracles of distance and punishment, even though they trained on booze. It also illumines murder. At Islington Agricultural Hall a dozen hopefuls take the field, led by the gentleman champion, Captain Chadwick, and his not so gentlemanly rival, Charlie Darrell. One contestant falls dead of poison on the second day; there will be another victim as the cruel pace goes on.

Here are true Victorians, not pious frauds of legend: Herriott and Jacobson, respectively promoter and manager; Mostyn-Smith, that strange-looking amateur of medicine; Monk, Charlie Darrell's trainer; Dora, Charlie's seductive wife. Sound investigation by Sergeant Cribb sounds out a first-rate story of sustained thrill.

In *The Death of a Man*, by Lesley Egan (Harper & Row, \$4.95), offers much confusion to Jesse Falkenstein, the lawyer who says he won't touch criminal cases, to Sergeant Andrew Clock of Los Angeles Homicide, and to fat old Edgar Walters, that perceptive armchair sleuth.

Lynette Lester, daughter of millionaire, rough-diamond Pat Ganne and friend of Falkenstein's sister, has consulted the lawyer about her marital troubles with enigmatic Glen Lester. Trouble deepens when Lynette's husband is found shot to death, apparently outside her own man's office building. Who killed Glen Lester is not the most difficult problem three investigators have to solve. They must trace someone backwards along a very twisted trail; and, as usual in novels where several 'unrelated' cases flicker in the background, one unrelated case will bear watching.

There are times when Miss Egan can be as ingeniously sneaky as Agatha Christie herself. With the text of her teletype message she slips in a central clue *almost* unnoticed. That's the stuff: good hunting all the way to a wry, ironic end.

Some may object to Douglas Clark's *Deadly Pattern* (Stein & Day \$4.95) as being beef-and-ale British detection of the stodgily familiar sort. You may not quite believe in the decaying East Coast town with its five buried corpses. You may not be over-fond of Chief Inspector Masters or grumpy Inspector Green.

But it's honest detection, for which we should be grateful. Its mosaic of evidence has been made as intricate as complete. And the capture of a monomaniac killer resolves every doubt.

Last on our list, though far from last in order of merit, we have *Accounting for Murder*, by Emma Lathen (Avon, 95¢), an early effort of perhaps the most distinguished talent to appear since 1960. Featuring Banker-Detective John Putnam Thatcher, senior vice-president of New York's Sloan Guaranty Trust, Miss Lathen has given us another of those ingenious exercises in crime-cum-big business which are real exercises in crime-cum-human nature. That something must be very wrong at the firm called National Calculating raises hell on Wall Street even before an accountant probing their affairs is strangled with the cord of his own adding-machine. It makes us look steadily in the wrong direction.

Apart from all her skill at plotting, the author's great skill lies in her ability to find real people inside official masks and stuffed shirts. These bankers, these company directors, these whiz kids of high finance—they're not godlike souls, praise be; they're as human as you and



DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 348th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . a quietly chilling story told with admirable restraint by a new and young writer.

The author, Richard Laymon, was 23 when we purchased "Desert Pickup." He was graduated from Willamette University in 1969 and at the time he submitted his first story he was completing his postgraduate work—for an M.A. in English—at Loyola University of Los Angeles. He plans to teach English, beginning with the Fall Semester of this year.

Mr. Laymon tells us that he enjoys back-packing in the Sierra Nevadas, target shooting and travel; but his "preoccupation has long been literature." In recent years he has caught himself neglecting school assignments to spend hours with his favorite sleuths of fiction—including Holmes, Benecolin, EQ, and Dupin. "Whatever damage such detours may have done to my classwork, I am certain that my own writing benefited enormously."

We'll drink a toast to that . . .

DESERT PICKUP

by RICHARD LAYMON

“ALL right!” HE FELT lucky about this one. Walking backward along the roadside, he stared at the oncoming car and offered his thumb. Sunlight glared on the windshield. Only at the last moment did he manage to get a look at the driver. A woman. That was that. So much for feeling lucky.

When he saw the brake lights flash on, he figured the woman was slowing down to be safe. When he saw the car stop, he figured this would be the “big tease.” He was used to it. The car stops, you run to it, then off it shoots, throwing dust in your face. He wouldn’t fall for it this time. He’d walk casually to the car.

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When he saw the backup lights go on he couldn't believe his luck. The car rolled backward to him. The woman inside leaned across the front seat and opened the door.

"Can I give you a ride?"

"Sure can." He jumped in and threw his seabag onto the rear seat. When he closed the door, cold air struck him. It seemed to freeze the sweat on his T-shirt. It felt fine. "I'm mighty glad to see you," he said. "You're a real lifesaver."

"How on earth did you get way out here?" she asked, starting again up the road.

"You wouldn't believe it."

"Go ahead and try me."

He enjoyed her cheerfulness and felt guilty about the slight nervous tremor he heard in her voice. "Well, this fella gives me a lift. Just this side of Blithe. And he's driving along through this—this *desert*—when suddenly he stops and tells me to get out and take a look at one of the tires. I get out—and off he goes! Tosses my seabag out a ways up the road. Don't know why a fella wants to do something like that. You understand what I mean?"

"I certainly do. These days you don't know who to trust."

"If that ain't the truth."

He looked at her. She wore boots and jeans and a faded blue shirt, but she had class. It was written all over her. The way she

talked, the way her skin was tanned just so, the way she wore her hair. Even her figure showed class. Nothing overdone.

"What I don't get," he went on, "is why the fella picked me up in the first place."

"He might have been lonely."

"Then why'd he dump me?"

"Maybe he decided not to trust you. Or maybe he just wanted to be alone again."

"Any way you slice it, it was a rotten thing to do. You understand what I mean?"

"I think so. Where are you headed?"

"Tucson."

"Fine. I'm going in that direction."

"How come you're not on the main highway? What are you doing out here?"

"Well—" She laughed nervously. "What I'm intending to do is not—well, not exactly legal."

"Yeah?"

"I'm going to steal some cactus from the National Park."

"What!" He laughed. "Wow! You mean you're out to lift cactus?"

"That's what I mean."

"Well, I sure do hope you don't get caught!"

The woman forced a smile. "There *is* a fine."

"Gol-ly."

"A sizeable fine."

"Well, I'd be glad to give you a hand."

"I've only got one shovel."

"Yeah, I saw it when I stowed my bag. I was wondering what you had a shovel for." He looked at her, laughing, and felt good that this woman with all her class was going to steal a few plants from the desert. "I've seen a lot of things, you understand. But never a cactus-napper." He laughed at his joke.

She didn't. "You've seen one now," she said.

They remained silent for a while. The young man thought about this classy woman driving down a lonely road in the desert just to steal some cactus, and very now and then he chuckled about it. He wondered why anybody would want a cactus in the first place. Why take the desert home with you? He wanted nothing more than to get away from this desolate place, and for the life of him he couldn't understand somebody wanting to take a part of it home. He concluded that the woman was crazy.

"Do you want to have some lunch?" the crazy woman asked. She still sounded nervous.

"Sure, I guess so."

"I've got a paper bag on the floor behind you. There are a couple of sandwiches in it, and some beer. Do you like beer?"

"Are you kidding?" He reached over the back of the seat and picked up the paper bag. The sandwiches smelled good. "Why

don't you pull off the road up there? We could go over by those rocks and have a picnic."

"That sounds like a nice idea." She stopped on a wide shoulder.

"No. Why don't we take the car further back? As far from the road as we can get. So if any cars pass by they won't see it. Then after we eat I'll help you dig up some cactus."

She glanced at him uneasily, then smiled. "Okay, fine. We'll do just that."

He knew. He could tell by that quick fearful flash of her eyes that she no longer trusted him. Next time he would have to wear a coat and tie. Maybe he'd get further that way.

The car bumped forward, weaving around large balls of cactus, crashing through undergrowth. It finally stopped behind a cluster of rocks. "Do you think they could see us from the road?" the woman asked. Her voice was shaking.

"I don't think so." He decided that maybe she still trusted him after all. Maybe she was just nervous about stealing the plants.

When they opened the doors, heat blasted in on them. They got out, the young man carrying the bag of sandwiches and beer. He sat down on a large rock. The woman sat down beside him.

"I hope you like the sandwiches. They're corned beef with Swiss cheese."

"Sounds good." He handed one of them to her and opened the beer. The cans were only cool, but he decided that cool beer was better than no beer at all. As he picked at the cellophane covering his sandwich he asked very casually, "Where's your husband?"

"What do you mean?"

He smiled. It had really put her on the spot. "Well, I just happened to see that you aren't wearing your ring, you understand what I mean?"

She looked down at the band of paler skin on her third finger. "We're separated."

"Oh? How come?"

"I found out that he'd been cheating on me."

"On you? No kidding! He must have been crazy."

"Not crazy. He just enjoyed hurting people. But I'll tell you something. Cheating on me was the worst mistake he ever made."

They ate in silence for a while, the young man occasionally shaking his head with disbelief. Finally his head stopped shaking. He decided that maybe he'd cheat too on a grown woman who gets her kicks stealing cactus. Good looks aren't everything. Who wants to live with a crazy woman? He drank off his beer. The last of it was warm and made him shiver.

He went to the car and took the shovel from the floor in back. "You want to come along? Pick

out the ones you want and I dig them up for you."

He watched her wad up the cellophane and stuff it, along with the empty beer cans, into the paper bag. She put the bag in the car, smiling at him saying "Every litter bit hurts." Then she walked together into the scrub.

"You must think I'm rather strange," she confided, "picking up a hitchhiker like I did. I hope you don't think—well, it was criminal of that man to leave you out in the middle of nowhere. But I'm glad I picked you up. For some reason I feel I can talk to you."

"That's nice. I like to listen. What about this one?" he asked pointing at a huge prickly cactus.

"Too big. What I want is something smaller."

"This one ought to fit in the trunk."

"I'd rather have a few smaller ones," she insisted. "Besides there's a kind in the Saguaro National Monument that I want to get. It'll probably be pretty big. I want to save the trunk for that one."

"Anything you say." They walked farther through the low dry brush. Finally the young man pointed. "How about that one? It's pretty little."

"Yes. That one is just about right."

The woman knelt beside it. Her shirt was dark blue against her

sweating back, and a slight breeze rustled her hair.

This will be a good way to remember her, the young man thought as he crashed the shovel down on her head. He buried her beside the cactus.

As he drove down the road he thought about her. She had been a nice woman with obvious class. Crazy, but nice. Her husband must have been a nut to cheat on a good-looking woman like her, unless of course it was because of her craziness.

He thought it nice that she had told him so much about herself. It felt good to be trusted with secrets.

He wondered how far she would have driven him. Not far enough. It was much better having the car to himself. That way he didn't have to worry. And the \$36 he found in her purse was a welcome bonus. He'd been afraid, for a moment, that he might find nothing but credit cards. All around, she had been a good find. He felt very lucky.

At least until the car began to move sluggishly. He pulled off the road and got out. "Oh, no," he muttered, seeing the flat rear tire. He leaned back against the side of the car and groaned. The sun beat on his face. He closed his eyes and shook his head, disgusted by the situation and thinking how awful it would be

to have to work at the tire fifteen minutes under that hot sun.

Then he heard, in the distance, the faint sound of a motor. Opening his eyes he squinted down the road. A car was approaching. For a moment he considered thumbing a ride. But that, he decided, would be stupid now that he had a car of his own. He closed his eyes again to wait for the car to pass. But it didn't pass. It stopped. He opened his eyes and gasped.

"Afternoon," the man in uniform called out.

"Hi," he said, his heart thudding.

"You got a spare?" the officer asked.

"I think so."

"What do you mean, you think so. You either have a spare or you don't."

"What I meant was, I'm not sure if it's any good. It's been a while, you understand?"

"Of course I understand. Guess I'll stick around till we find out. This is rough country. Not many cars pass. A person can die out here. If the spare's no good I'll radio in for a tow."

"Okay, thanks." He opened the door and took the keys from the ignition. Everything's okay, he told himself. No reason in the world for this cop to suspect anything.

"Did you go off the road back a ways?"

"No, why?" His numb hand dropped the keys. The other man picked them up.

"Flats around here, they're usually caused by cactus spines. They're murder." He followed the officer to the rear of the car. The octagonal key didn't fit the trunk. "Don't know why those dopes in Detroit don't just make one key that'll fit the doors and trunk both."

"I don't know," the young man said, matching the other's tone of disgust and feeling even more confident.

The round key fit. The trunk popped open.

The officer threw a tarp on the ground and then leveled his pistol at the young man, who was staring at the body of a middle-aged man who obviously had class.



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a NEW Nick Velvet story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Here is the 9th in the series of new stories about Nick Velvet, the fussy felon, the choosy crook . . . This time Nick is hired, for his minimum fee of \$20,000, to steal a steed—a valueless wooden horse from a merry-go-round on its last legs. Now, why in the world should anyone be willing to pay \$20,000 for a solid wooden horse not worth more than 20 cents as junk? Nick Velvet's kind of caper . . .

THE THEFT OF THE BLUE HORSE

by **EDWARD D. HOCH**

“**I** WANT YOU TO STEAL A wooden horse,” the green-eyed man told Nick Velvet.

Nick, whose business was theft and whose specialty was the unusual, hardly blinked at the words. “There’s something Homeric about the assignment,” he conceded, gazing out of the car window at the muddy waters of the Hudson. “And where would I find this stealable steed? Perhaps up the river a bit, in Troy, New York?”

The green-eyed man, whose name was Peter Fowles, merely frowned. “No, it’s not that sort of wooden horse. As a matter of fact, it’s a merry-go-round

horse. I have a picture of it here.” He took out a color photograph of a garish carousel standing alone against a background of leafy trees.

Nick studied the picture, deducing from the trees that the photo had been taken some months earlier, at the height of the summer. One of the horses in the foreground had been circled in black ink. Its shape was identical with the other horses in the picture, but the horses varied in colors and markings. This one was an improbable blue, obviously meant to attract a highly imaginative child.

“This blue one that’s circled?”

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"That's it."

"I charge twenty thousand dollars, you know."

Peter Fowles nodded. "I know."

"You could hire a couple of guys to steal it for fifty bucks."

"I want you, Velvet."

Nick shrugged. He was never one to turn down money. "What's so valuable about it?"

"Nothing. It has no value. You only steal things that have no value, don't you?"

"That's right," Nick answered. He tapped a slim finger on the photo. "Where is this thing located?"

"About two hundred miles from here, in a town called Cartier."

"Near the St. Lawrence River."

"You know the place?"

Nick shook his head. "No, but Jacques Cartier was the Frenchman who discovered the St. Lawrence. It seems likely that a town named after him would be near the river."

"Actually, the merry-go-round is located in a large park that's right on the river. It's not an amusement park, but there are a few concessions scattered around, mainly for children. As you can see from the photo, the merry-go-round is off pretty much by itself."

"This is November. Is it closed for the winter yet?"

"It will be closing any day now. But the park still gets a few late

campers on sunny week-ends."

Fowles leaned back in his seat. "I need the blue horse by next Monday morning. Can you do it?"

"Of course," Nick said. They shook hands and Nick pocketed the photograph. The assignment seemed simple enough, but from past experience Nick knew that the simplest of crimes can develop the most unexpected complications.

Cartier was such a typically midwestern small town that Nick would have expected it to turn up in Kansas or Nebraska or Iowa rather than in upstate New York. The main street—which was called Main Street—was a jumble of little shops and lunch counters. A single movie theater was playing a year-old western, and a red-white-and-blue banner across the intersection urged voters to *Reelect Waggoner—A Mayor For The People!* It was a week after election day, and Nick concluded that Mayor Waggoner had won. Otherwise the banner would probably be down by now.

Once past the center of town the area began to look more like a prosperous suburb. There was a medium-sized shopping center and a drive-in movie. There were also a couple of ski shops, reminding Nick that he was deep in snow country. The day was fair, however, and unusually warm for the second week of November.

As the river came into view through the nearly bare trees, Nick felt a twinge of remorse for the summer that had just passed. There had been too few days of sailing with Gloria, and too many of rather dull travel to the jobs which earned him his more than comfortable livelihood.

Presently the park came into view, and then the carousel itself. It was larger than it had appeared in the photo—a great behemoth of a merry-go-round with gilded cherubs and mirrored panels. The horses that circled endlessly were painted in a variety of bright colors, and he saw the blue one almost at once. The paint on all of them was a bit weathered. It was the season's end, and they would have to wait till spring for fresh coats.

"Can I help you?" a girl's voice asked. Nick turned and saw a young blonde in paint-streaked jeans leaning against the fender of his car, watching him.

He smiled at her. "I was thinking of going for a ride on the merry-go-round."

"Closed for the season," the girl said promptly.

"You run it?"

"My dad does."

Nick held out his hand. "My name is Velvet. I sell carnival supplies."

"Never saw you before," she said, ignoring the hand.

"I'm new to this territory."

"We have no need of carnival supplies. All there is here is the merry-go-round."

"Oh."

She relaxed a bit and introduced herself. "My name is Dorothy Defoe. Most people call me Dot."

Nick broadened his smile. He needed to get a closer look at those horses. "Couldn't I take just one ride? I'm sure your dad wouldn't mind."

"Oh, I guess it would be all right. I'm just on edge today." She sprinted off to the carousel, showing long attractive legs.

Nick followed and hopped aboard as she started the music.

"Why?" he asked. "What's the matter with today?"

"It's these damned kids around here!" He smiled again at the words. She couldn't have been more than twenty herself.

"Kids are kids. What did they do?" The merry-go-round was picking up speed, whirling him around in a blur of color.

"Well, they broke in here sometime last night and stole one of the horses—one of those on the other side. Did you ever hear of such a wild thing?"

One of the horses had indeed been stolen, apparently sawed away from the brass pole that ran up through its middle. Nick bent to examine the traces of the sawing. Was it possible there had

been two blue horses on the merry-go-round and that someone had beaten him to his prize?

"What color was it?" he asked Dot Defoe.

"Color? Oh, the color's not important."

"I was just wondering."

"I guess it was a sort of brown—a horse color, you know. But I can't imagine what they wanted it for. Sawing it off like that probably ruined it, anyway."

The merry-go-round had slowed to a stop, and Nick stood patting the smooth painted wood of the blue horse. "Probably just kids, as you say. Thanks for the ride."

"Sure. You going to show me some samples now?"

Nick smiled and hopped to the ground. "I'll be back, sometime when your father's here."

"Tomorrow will be the last day. Then we'll go for the winter."

"You live around here?"

She tossed her blonde hair like a rangy colt. "Not far away. You askin' for a date?"

"Maybe." He was almost old enough to be her father, but that fact of chronology didn't bother him. Taking Dot Defoe out was part of the job, and if he enjoyed doing it, so much the better. "Where do people go in the evening around here?"

"Sometimes across the river to Canada," she said. "There are some swinging places in Kingston."

"Fine. Suppose I pick you up here tonight and we'll swing together."

She grinned impishly. "You're a fast worker, Mr. Velvet. Let's make it seven o'clock."

He met her at the merry-go-round at seven and they drove across the border to Kingston. I had been years since his last visit to Canada, but he remembered the friendly look of the place, the inviting little bars that offered solace from the cold. In one of them, over a glass of Canadian whiskey, he asked, "Do you know a fellow named Peter Fowles?"

"Mr. Fowles? Certainly—he's a business associate of my father's. In fact, he's the one who financed the merry-go-round in the first place, three years ago."

"It seems older than that."

"Mr. Fowles bought it from one of those Coney Island amusement parks that went out of business. He paid to have it shipped up here and reassembled in the park. It was very good of him to do it."

"Why should he be so good?" Nick asked casually. "Is he an old friend of your father's?"

"Not exactly. They had some sort of business deal together once, and I got the impression that Mr. Fowles felt he owed my dad something."

"Something like a merry-go-round?"

"It's been profitable for him,

really! I don't know why, because we never seem to do that much business, but he's making enough to put me through college."

"You go near here?"

She nodded. "State University. It's close enough so I can live at home with dad."

After Nick had a second drink they drifted down the street to another place, a livelier one with a small combo and dancing. It was here that a burly man in a wrinkled gray suit approached Nick at the bar. "You're Velvet, aren't you?" he asked. "Didn't I meet you once in New York?"

With the girl at his side Nick could hardly deny his identity. He hadn't seen the need for an alias this far from his usual haunts, but now he was beginning to wish he'd used one. "That's my name," he answered, "but I don't know you."

The man bent closer, his eyes hazy with a familiar glint. He was high on something, probably pot. "Stay away from this territory, Velvet. There's nothing for you up here."

"Thanks for the tip."

The man ambled off and Dot Defoe asked, "Who was that, a rival salesman?"

"I suppose so," Nick shrugged.

"He looked like a gangster!"

"They often do." But the encounter bothered him. "Come on, I should be getting you back home."

They drove across the bridge in silence, and he wondered at the sudden coolness he detected in her manner. Had she built the whole thing into some wildly romantic fantasy that had failed to materialize? Sometimes he thought he'd never understand women.

Her father was due back at the carousel that night, so he headed the car for the park. "He's there," she said. "I see a light."

But almost at once they both knew something was wrong. A car was standing with its door open, and there was no movement from the lighted merry-go-round. Nick had seen this sort of thing too many times before. He was out and running before the girl could panic.

"Hello!" he called out. "Anybody here?" One hand had gone to the little pistol under his arm.

There was a groan from somewhere close and he looked down. A white-haired man who could only have been Dorothy's father was sprawled among some overturned boxes. He was bleeding from a cut along the side of his head.

"Can you talk?" Nick asked, dropping to his knees beside the man.

"I—yes—"

"Who did this?"

"Two men." He pointed toward the merry-go-round. "I caught them stealing another horse."

Nick followed the pointing finger. Defoe was right. Now there was a second gap in the circle of prancing wooden horses. The merry-go-round thieves had struck again.

They drove Dan Defoe to the emergency ward of the local hospital, where the cut in his battered head was stitched. He'd insisted on not calling the police, much against his daughter's pleas, and Nick was in no position to want the police involved. He convinced Dot that since the carousel was closing for the season anyway, it would be best not to create a fuss with the local police.

"It's probably some game the kids are playing," Nick suggested as they drove away from the hospital.

Dan Defoe held his bandaged head. With his white hair covered he looked younger. "Those were no kids that slugged me!"

"If we don't report it to the police," Dot argued, "how can we get the insurance company to pay off?"

"We'll worry about that later," her father said. "That old merry-go-round's on its last legs anyway. Maybe next year we should consider investing in a new one." He turned to Nick. "You sell carousels, mister?"

"Nothing that large," Nick mumbled.

"Daddy! How can we ever afford a new merry-go-round? We don't make that much money on it!"

"It's been more profitable than you'd imagine," her father said quietly.

The lights of the merry-go-round were still burning, and Nick realized that in the excitement they'd gone off and left the building open. During the season it was open on all sides to attract youthful customers. Now, at the season's end, the great wooden shutters had been locked in place on all but the river side. Here, though, the lights blazed like a sort of beacon, and for all they knew the robbers could have returned for the rest of the merry-go-round.

But all was as they'd left it, including the blue horse which would be Nick's special prize. He knew now that he could wait no longer than another few hours. The man's threat across the river, coupled with the theft of a second horse tonight, indicated that more than kids were involved. For whatever reason, others were after the "valueless" merry-go-round horse. When they discovered they'd stolen the wrong one again, they'd come back—and perhaps this time they would beat Nick to the blue one, either through knowledge or accident.

"You've helped a lot tonight," Dot told him while her father

straightened up the place. "You've earned yourself another ride."

Nick smiled and mounted the blue steed, while Dot switched on the music and got astride the horse next to his. Her miniskirt rode up over perfect thighs, but neither of them seemed to mind. "Shall we try for the brass ring?" Nick asked.

Dan Defoe glanced up at the wooden hopper with its outstretched arm. "The thing's empty," he said. "No brass rings any more this year."

Nick nodded, his eyes on the spot where the two stolen horses had been. Perhaps, for Dan Defoe, there would be no brass rings any more, ever. Here, like his namesake's famous character, Robinson Crusoe, he'd been cast ashore by the sea of life. And here he might end his days without rescue. Because whatever game was being played out at the Cartier Park merry-go-round deeply involved Dan Defoe and his one-time friend Peter Fowles.

It was a game growing more dangerous every minute.

Nick went back to his hotel room about 1:00 a.m., but he had no intention of going to bed. He checked first the assortment of tools he carried in his car trunk—far more effective than the saws the previous horse thieves had resorted to. The tools were in a carefully hidden false bottom

of his trunk—safe from the eyes of customs inspectors when the trunk had crossed the bridge earlier that evening—and Nick had other treasures stored there too.

Right now he was interested in some small pets that lived in a shoe box. They were not used to the chill temperature of northern New York in November, and he hoped they hadn't been harmed. He'd brought them along in the event the merry-go-round was in constant operation and needed to be cleared in a hurry. That was not the case, but they still might come in handy. He lifted the lid an inch and dropped in an open packet of dried insects—their food for another day.

When he returned to the merry-go-round it was almost two o'clock and there was no sign of anyone around. But he witnessed a strange sight beneath the clouded autumn moon. The side of the building facing the river was still open, and the carousel lights still glowed brightly. No wonder, Nick thought, no wonder they steal the fool's horses when he leaves the place open like that!

Nick parked his car under a tree and put out the lights. He could see the blue horse waiting, but it would have to wait a little longer. The merry-go-round's open side was like a lighthouse beacon,

and he wanted to see what traveler that beacon might attract.

He'd been waiting almost an hour when he heard the muffled sounds of a motorboat moving toward shore. The river was in darkness, and the park was lit only by the carousel. For a time he could see nothing. And then, quite suddenly, a single figure broke from the darkness at the river's edge. It was a man Nick couldn't recognize and he was running toward the lighted side of the carousel.

Nick tensed to intercept him, and then he saw the other shadows break from the trees. Two men, running fast after the first one. In the lead was the bulky man in the wrinkled suit who had approached Nick earlier across the river. He moved quickly for his size and reached the lighted doorway of the merry-go-round only a few steps behind the first man.

Nick heard the scream, and knew he was too late to help.

By the time he reached the wooden building, the bulky man and his companion were both inside, kneeling by the body of their victim. Nick ducked behind a convenient trash barrel, his hand once more on the little gun he always carried.

"It's not on him," the smaller of the two men whined. He was rat-faced, with long dark hair. "Morris, it's not here! You said

he'd have it with him!"

The bulky man cursed and sat back on his heels. In that instant Nick remembered him—Morris Rainey, a small-time New York fence who specialized in stolen jewelry. Now he was branching out—into murder.

"He's got to have it on him," Rainey insisted. "He was only in here a second before I got him." As he spoke he drew the bloodied knife from the dead man's back and wiped it on his handkerchief.

"He musta hid it somewhere on the merry-go-round."

"He never reached it, I tell you. I stabbed him just inside the door. Besides, we've already taken apart two of the horses without finding any of the stuff."

"So what do we do, Morris?"

The bulky man thought about it. "Let's take the body with us. The stuff has to be on him somewhere. We'll check his shoes and his clothes. Come on, give me a hand."

Nick glued himself to the ground and waited. It was not his job to capture murderers, so he merely watched as they carried their victim to the hidden car. His job was the blue horse, and he could not delay any longer.

He gave them five minutes, to make certain their car would not return. Then he set to work. He doused the lights in the merry-go-round and set up a small battery-operated lamp that he carried with

his tools. Then he quickly unbolted the brass pole which ran up through the center of the blue horse, attaching it to the carousel proper and giving life to its galloping motion. A merry-go-round is a complex piece of machinery, and yet so simple. There was no need to saw through the wooden horse and thus destroy it. Peter Fowles was paying Nick for one horse and he would have it, all in a single piece.

The layers of paint made the brass pole stick, and it took Nick a quarter of an hour to free the blue horse. But there it was at last—a hole down its middle, otherwise intact. Nick took one more look around the place, then put out his lamp. The horse was a bit heavier than he'd expected, but he got it out to his car without much difficulty. The trunk lid would not close with the horse inside, so he tied it the best he could after placing a burlap bag over the jutting legs. It was the beginning of hunting season in the area, so the horse could easily be the carcass of a small deer. Besides, he'd be far away by morning.

He stopped once on the drive south, pulling off the road to examine his prize with a flashlight and penknife. After a half-hour's careful study he convinced himself that the blue merry-go-round horse was just that and no more. It contained no secret drawers or

hidden crevices, no place where the dead man could have hidden his treasure. It was just a solid wooden horse, with a hole for the brass pole, worn leather stirrups nailed into place, a set of leather reins, and nothing more.

His mind was troubled during the rest of the drive. It had all seemed so simple when he thought the horse contained the treasure that Morris Rainey and his accomplice were seeking. Now he didn't know. Had the girl fooled him somehow and repainted the horses with different colors since Peter Fowles took his photograph? No, the paint on all the horses was too worn to be of recent vintage.

Well, he sighed, Fowles was paying him \$20,000 and that was all that really mattered. Let him figure out what to do with a valueless wooden horse.

It was nearly noon that day when he stood in a garage in upper Westchester County and delivered the horse to Peter Fowles. The green-eyed man examined it with interest. "That's the one, all right. And ahead of schedule! You do good work, Velvet."

Nick smiled. "I should tell you, though, that your Canadian courier was murdered last night by Morris Rainey."

Fowles scowled and said nothing for a moment. He seemed

to be considering Nick through the haze of smoke from his cigarette. Finally he asked, "How much do you know?"

"I know the diamonds aren't in this horse, because I looked for them." It was a shot in the dark, but it hit home.

"Who said anything about diamonds?" Fowles demanded.

"Morris Rainey is a fence who specializes in jewelry. Something is being smuggled across from Canada and left at the merry-go-round—something quite small, because I didn't notice your man carrying anything before he was killed. Diamonds seemed to be as good a guess as any. Narcotics would have been bulkier."

"All right," the green-eyed man admitted. "What else do you know?"

"That you set up Defoe with the merry-go-round a few years ago, right there on the shore of the St. Lawrence, facing Canada. At night sometimes, even after he's closed for the season, Defoe leaves a doorway lit on the Canadian side—an easy target for a smuggler crossing by boat from Canada. The smuggler leaves the diamonds in the merry-go-round, and Defoe brings them the rest of the way down to you. It's more complicated than crossing the border by car, but the customs inspectors might have become suspicious of Defoe or the Canadian if they crossed too often,

and there was always the danger of a really effective search. I gather this is a regular big-scale operation. You didn't want to chance a slip-up."

"That's close enough, Velvet. You catch on fast."

"Does Defoe's daughter know about it?"

"I doubt that. She just helps him around the place."

"And Rainey?"

"A punk trying to cut himself in."

"He did pretty well with the cutting last night."

"You saw him kill Burke?"

"If Burke was your Canadian man, yes. I also saw that they didn't find the diamonds on him."

"He needed only a second to hide them," Fowles said.

"He had that long."

"Then they're still at the carousel."

Nick frowned. "Where could he hide a packet of diamonds in one or two seconds and yet not leave it in plain sight? Did he slide them under the merry-go-round?"

"Too obvious a place to be safe."

"And if they're not in the horse why are you paying twenty thousand for it?"

Peter Fowles smiled and said nothing. From inside his house there came the ringing of a telephone. "Excuse me," he said, and went off to answer it.

Nick patted the smooth flanks

of the blue horse, remembering all the merry-go-rounds of his youth, and waited. Peter Fowles's home was large and plush, situated on a hillside road that gave him a rolling view of the Hudson Valley countryside. It was an expensive view, but then, men like Fowles could always afford the best.

"Velvet!" Fowles called. "Come in here!"

Nick entered the living room and then a crowded businesslike study. Peter Fowles sat behind the desk, next to a cradled white telephone. "What's the matter?"

"That was Rainey. He knows I hired you. Did you mention my name to Defoe's daughter?"

"I might have," Nick admitted.

"That was a mistake. A foolish mistake." He flipped a switch by the phone. "Here, you'd better listen to this."

Nick detected the hum of recording tape being rewound. "Do you always record your phone conversations?"

"A business necessity."

He flipped the switch again, and Nick recognized Morris Rainey's harsh tones. "*Fowles, we want the diamonds!*"

"*What diamonds? I don't know what you're talking about.*"

"*I want a piece of this action, Fowles. Burke's dead, and he won't be the last if you don't come across. I know you hired Velvet to steal the blue horse.*"

"Oh?"

"*Damned right! When we couldn't find the diamonds we went back to the merry-go-round. We've got Defoe and the girl, and they'll be the next to go. They say the diamonds were in the blue horse and Velvet stole it. But the girl said he mentioned your name, Fowles. Velvet took the horse for you to double-cross Defoe.*"

"How do you know that?"

"*Velvet's a paid operator. Look, Fowles, you got till midnight tonight to get up here with the diamonds Velvet stole. Otherwise, Defoe and the girl are dead. And they won't be the last. Understand?*" The line clicked and went dead.

"Well," Nick said softly.

"I didn't think he'd react quite that way," Fowles admitted.

Nick nodded. "I think I'm beginning to see it more clearly now. The wooden horse was a real Trojan horse after all, a bit of misdirection that you planned to fool Rainey. He knew me by sight, and you must have been aware of that fact. You hired me to steal one of the merry-go-round horses, knowing Rainey would recognize me or at least hear of my involvement. My fee and my working habits are known in the underworld. Rainey would think you were double-crossing Defoe—just what he does think—because the diamonds must be in the horse. You paid

twenty thousand not for the horse but for my reputation. It was worth that much to get Rainey off your neck. Now he's convinced you have the diamonds."

"Right again, Velvet. Rainey knew the stuff came to the merry-go-round and somehow was hidden there. When I heard he suspected a hollow horse I got the idea of paying the well-known Nick Velvet to steal one of the horses."

"Rainey stole a couple himself."

"He was trying to find the right one."

"But there is no hollow horse," Nick said. "And now you'll just let Rainey kill those two, won't you?"

Fowles shifted in his chair, frowning. "That's my problem."

"What is?"

"I don't give a damn about Defoe or the girl. He's outlived his usefulness to me anyhow. But the latest packet of diamonds is still hidden there—the one Burke brought last night. Defoe knows the hiding place. If it gets down to a matter of his or his daughter's life he'll talk. Rainey thinks the stuff is gone, but Defoe knows it's still there."

"How much is the shipment worth?"

"At wholesale, about eighty thousand dollars. Retail could be double that. There are a lot of wealthy women in New York,

women who like diamonds. I was bringing through two shipments a month during the summer."

"Will you tell me where they're hidden?"

"Hardly, Mr. Velvet!"

Nick smiled. "Then suppose I tell you."

It was twenty minutes before midnight, on a moonless night, when Nick Velvet returned to the merry-go-round at Cartier Park. He had known all along that he would come back, because he was not the sort to leave a girl like Dot Defoe at the mercy of a killer. Perhaps he had always been something of a knight, doing battle with modern dragons, and if the Grail he sought was merely money, was he so different from most other men?

As he stepped into the lighted area in front of the carousel a squeaky voice said, "Put up your hands!"

"All right. I'm not armed."

"Inside!"

He stepped up, entering the merry-go-round building. Morris Rainey was there, sitting on a straight-backed chair, still wearing the same rumpled suit. "Well, Nick Velvet—come to bring back the horse?"

"That's right," Nick said. "It's in my car. Where are your prisoners?"

Rainey gestured toward the carousel and then Nick saw them.

Defoe and his daughter were bound and gagged, sitting on two of the wooden horses. "I was just getting ready to send them on their last ride," Rainey chuckled. "Good thing Fowles came through."

The rat-faced gunman came in dragging the blue horse. "The diamonds aren't here," he said. "It's just like the other ones we stole."

Rainey raised his pistol, pointing it at Nick's chest. "Where are the diamonds?" he asked.

"Some of them are here in my pocket. The rest are where Burke hid them before he was killed."

"Burke didn't have time to hide anything."

Nick motioned toward his pocket. "If you'll let me show you—"

"Frisk him," Rainey ordered.

The rat-faced man ran his fingers over Nick's body, removing the small package from his inside pocket. "Here it is, Morris."

"Where's the rest?" Rainey asked, motioning with the gun.

"Let me have the package back and I'll show you."

Both guns were on him. "No tricks or you're a dead man, Velvet."

Nick took back the package and weighed it carefully in one hand. "Burke ran in here with you right behind him and took it out of his pocket. He never

reached the merry-go-round itself, and the parcel wasn't on the floor. So he must have thrown it."

"Thrown it?"

"Exactly. Just like this."

Nick threw the package over their heads, straight into the open hopper that was supposed to hold the brass rings. He could see Defoe's eyes widen above his gag. "Right in there, gentlemen, where Burke always left them. A perfect hiding place, and it only took a second."

Rainey tightened his grip on the gun. "Get it, Sam."

The rat-faced man climbed up and looked into the hopper. "There are two packages in here, Morris."

Rainey's granite face relaxed into a smile. "So you were on the level after all, Velvet." Then, "All right, Sam, bring down both."

Nick allowed his eyelids to droop slightly as he waited. They opened Burke's package first, and a glitter of diamonds danced across the floor. "Jeeze!" Sam exclaimed.

"Open the other one," Rainey said, still holding the gun on Nick. "We'll be rich after tonight!"

The rat-faced man opened the package, greedily tearing at the paper. Then his eyes widened in terror and he screamed. "Morris! Scorpions!"

A half dozen of the creatures, some almost five inches long,

came tumbling out of their tight confinement. Rainey took one look at their menacing, whip-like tails and started firing at the floor.

Nick leaped at the rat-faced Sam, knocking him aside, and wrenched at the lever that started the merry-go-round. Before Rainey could bring his gun up, Dot and her father were being whirled to the other side.

Grabbing hold of a brass pole, Nick hung on to the revolving carousel. His foot caught Rainey in the stomach and the man crumpled to the floor, landing on top of a running scorpion. Sam, back on his feet, was having no part of it. He dropped his gun and ran for the door. The battle of the carousel was over as quickly as it had started.

"How can we ever thank you?" Dot Defoe asked, rubbing her wrists where the ropes had chafed them.

"Just call the police for Rainey," Nick said. "I imagine he's

still got Burke's body in his car."

Dan Defoe stepped gingerly down from the carousel platform. "What about these damned scorpions?"

"They're whip scorpions, not real scorpions at all, and they're quite harmless unless you get a heart attack just looking at them. You can round them up by hand. Any you miss will just die of the cold. They're warm-weather creatures, but quite effective at times."

"You're going now?" Dot asked.

"As soon as I gather up a few diamonds from the floor."

Peter Fowles was waiting for him in town. The police investigation would probably put an end to his diamond smuggling activities, but at least Nick felt he should deliver this last shipment to the man. Perhaps he'd take a little commission for himself. There was a fine blue-white stone that would look perfect in a ring for Gloria.



a NEW detective story by

LAWRENCE TREAT

A non-series procedural that reads like a house afire, and finally explodes ... The body of Judith Gorman was found in "Lovers' Lane." It was a case of murder, first degree. The investigation was handled by Sergeant Wenzel, and while the sergeant was not the best-liked man in the Criminal Investigation Department, he was—even his enemies had to admit it—a topnotch detective ...

THE VERDICT

by LAWRENCE TREAT

THE CASE WAS MURDER, FIRST degree. Plenty of malice, plenty of forethought. Sergeant Wenzel, Criminal Investigation Department, handled it.

He was a small man with delicate features and quick movements. His energy was inexhaustible and he walked with short scurrying steps that left bigger men panting to keep up with him. He liked to remind his colleagues that he was the only State Trooper with a perfect record. To a man they disliked him, as did his wife.

When he saw the corpse slumped over in the front seat of the ten-year-old car he remarked on how pretty she must have been.

Then he laughed, that low, cold, superior neigh of his.

The car was parked about a hundred feet back from the road, in a grassy, rutty lane that sliced into the forest and went nowhere. An assortment of beer cans, candy wrappers, and miscellaneous litter indicated what the road was mostly used for.

The sergeant's keen eyes spotted a piece of material that had somehow got wedged in the buckle of a damaged seat belt. The material was wool, a gray herringbone pattern such as might have come from a man's sports jacket. A plaid cap, folded and crumpled up, was caught between

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the side edge of the back seat and the wall of the car.

The sergeant picked up the cap and studied it thoughtfully. "I'll bet it wasn't left here last night," he said. "Still, I'm damn well going to find out whose cap it is."

He looked at the inside. It bore the label of a fashionable Chicago haberdasher. There were no initials on the sweatband or on the lining. The sergeant filled out an identification tag and wired it through the crown of the cap.

Following orthodox procedure he ordered his men to search the surrounding area. One of them found the murder weapon. It was an S & W "38" that was later identified from its numbers as part of a batch sent to an Oregon police department eight years before. The entire shipment had been stolen and some of the weapons had turned up in a gangster's arsenal seized not long ago. The gun in question, however, was not listed as among those recovered, and its history was not known.

Sergeant Wenzel had no trouble identifying the girl. Her name was Judith Gorman and she worked for a real estate firm in the city. She commuted to work and she lived a half mile down the road, which dead-ended just past her house. The sergeant punned on the words "dead end," and one of the troopers laughed. The others merely glared.

"I'd guess," the sergeant said, grandstanding, "that our dear little Judith was probably pregnant, and that she had a tryst with a lover who had better plans for himself than marrying her. He saw no way out except this. Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* all over again."

Wenzel was sharp. He not only made sound deductions, but he was quick to find the holes in even his own logic. His thinking was flexible, and when he was wrong he was the first to spot the error. Except that, with his flair for detective work, he rarely made mistakes.

He sent his men up and down the road to gather information, while he himself went to the Gorman house and interrogated Judith's mother.

"Was your little girl pregnant?" he asked in a low voice.

Mrs. Gorman, dazed and shocked by the question, shook her head. "No—no—not Judith. She would have told me. She came to me with everything."

"Yes? Did she tell you where she was going last night?"

"No, but I'm sure it's not what you think."

"Who was she with?"

"I don't know."

"Ah!" the sergeant said. His tone was accusing. In the course of his interview with Mrs. Gorman he wrung her dry and may well have shortened her life by several

years; but he got the information he wanted.

Judith had had several boy friends that Mrs. Gorman knew of, and Sergeant Wenzel overwhelmed her with questions about them. Whom had Judith gone out with the night before last? The night before that? The previous week? What names had she mentioned? What phone calls had she made, received? Mrs. Gorman had listened in on them, Wenzel could tell she was nosey, so what had Judith said? He pestered, cajoled, insulted, coaxed. He managed to compile a list of names and establish a clear picture of Judith Gorman's life and character. Then he got permission to go through her personal possessions.

He fingered her underwear lovingly, and while no one else was in the room he pocketed a bra to keep as a souvenir. Nevertheless he was efficient in his search. He located her address book, a pad with some phone numbers, and then some miscellaneous notes and jottings on scraps of paper and old envelopes, all of which he eventually discarded as clues. He found a souvenir cigarette lighter that had been given out at a trade-book convention in Miami three years ago.

Later, of course, with painstaking thoroughness, the sergeant checked out every name and every

phone number, but Judith's known boy friends had ironclad alibis for the time of her death.

But before leaving the Gorman house the sergeant had another interview with Mrs. Gorman who, thanks to the ministrations of a couple of neighbors, had begun to calm down. Wenzel knocked on her bedroom door and after explaining that he merely wanted to make sure she was all right, he was permitted to enter. She looked up at him and said, pathetically, that if she'd only insisted on finding out who Judith's unknown boy friend was, Judith might be alive today.

The sergeant agreed and told Mrs. Gorman that he was glad she was now facing facts—a statement which provoked her to tears and further self-recriminations. He stared down at her and then, politely, he asked her whether she'd like some pictures of her daughter's corpse. Mrs. Gorman went into hysterics. The sergeant, satisfied with what he'd accomplished thus far, left the house.

Back at the scene of the murder he found that the Medical Examiner had arrived. The M.E. announced that Judith Gorman had died of a bullet wound at about midnight the previous evening. The sergeant observed that that was hardly news, and he brusquely ordered the M.E. to make a thorough autopsy.

"What the hell kind of autopsies do you think I make?" the doctor demanded.

"Doctor, Doctor," Wenzel said, "I'm just reminding you. That's my job, to see that everybody does the best work he's capable of."

The doctor growled, and the sergeant chuckled contentedly. Then his men started coming in to report.

Several of the Gorman neighbors, like so many people living on small, country roads, were car watchers. They counted and identified all the cars that went by. They knew who had visited the Gormans, when the plumber came and when the electrician passed, and how long they stayed. They knew the local cars by sight and sound and knew who owned which, and they stated that on three evenings within the last couple of weeks Judith had driven out shortly after dinner, and had returned (the time was a guess, based on the sound of a car heard heading toward the Gormans') around midnight. In other words, Judith had gone to meet her date secretly, rather than have him call for her.

Audibly, Wenzel made a slight change in his original analysis of the case. "Her love," he said, "might have been a married man."

The sergeant was also told that there had been a party at the Wallensacks' last night. The

Wallensacks owned the big house at the head of the road, a fifteen or twenty minute walk to the Gorman house and maybe a five minute walk to the lane where the body had been found. The sergeant drove to the Wallensack house.

He and Mrs. Wallensack got along famously. She told about her party, and they joked over the antics of the Wallensacks' dog. It was a thoroughbred puli and they called it Tosca. It had long soft hair which a few years ago Mrs. Wallensack had clipped and then spun and woven into a scarf. She showed the sergeant the scarf and she preened herself in front of him. He'd never heard of a puli, but he shifted the conversation to other breeds and told stories about a retriever he pretended he'd once had. She laughed uproariously and invited him to come back when he was off duty.

After a while they discussed the Gorman case. Mrs. Wallensack called Judith "the little Gorman girl." Wenzel asked why she hadn't been invited to the party. Mrs. Wallensack was taken aback at the mere idea. A little thing like that, who worked in a real estate office? Of course not. And her mother, Mrs. Gorman — simpleminded. That was the best you could say for her. And they certainly didn't rate social acceptance.

The sergeant left with a list

of Mrs. Gorman's guests. He was surprised to find Harlan Bancroft's name there. Bancroft, an ex-cop who was now head of his own investigation agency—had he been there as a guest or on business? The sergeant wondered. Then, back in his office, he sat down and compared the Wallensack names with those in Judith's address book. One name appeared on both lists. Cyrus Larrabie.

The sergeant knew him. A few weeks ago Larrabie had been involved in an auto accident that the sergeant had investigated. Larrabie had suffered some minor cuts, and the sergeant had taken him home. No charges had been brought.

So—Cyrus Larrabie. The sergeant had his man.

He proceeded slowly nevertheless, for the sergeant was careful, cautious, and conscientious. He called the state's technical research laboratory.

"I want a thorough job on the Gorman car," he said. "I want hair samples, fingerprints, smudges, samples of dirt and dust. I want everything you can find and I want a complete analysis. I want you to go over the whole car with a vacuum cleaner. In particular I want to know if there's any blood that isn't typed as the Gorman girl's. I want you to examine the seats, the door latches and door handles for any

threads or fragments of clothing. I want—"

"Look," the research man said, "we know our job. Just tell us what you don't want."

"I don't want any mistakes," Wenzel said, and hung up.

The lab men did a painstaking job, because they knew that Wenzel would spot any oversights. They found a trace of blood, AB type, subgroup m, RH negative. It was a type so rare as to be almost identifying. By contrast Judith's was the very common O type. As for the patch of wool which had been caught on the edge of the door, the lab men indulged in the gobbledy-gook of technical findings, and then called it wool of the highest quality and asked for a sample to compare it with. Further, they found an assortment of hair ends which they neatly classified as to sex, color, race, and probable age of subject. As usual several of the hairs, and the only usable fingerprints, belonged to police officers who had examined the car.

Wenzel was pleased with the lab report. Meanwhile he had called Larrabie's number and been told that Larrabie had left this morning on a business trip and would be back in three days. He worked as a textbook salesman and specialized in paperbacks.

The sergeant, posing as a friend of Larrabie's who was in town for a few days, called Larrabie's

publishing firm. Larrabie, the sergeant claimed, had promised to show him around town and he, Wenzel, was real disappointed. One of Larrabie's colleagues suggested that Wenzel meet him for a drink, around 5:30 that evening.

Sitting at the bar, Wenzel steered the conversation around to Larrabie. It seemed that Larrabie, a bachelor, was something of a swinger. None of the secretaries in the office was safe from him, but Larrabie was going to be married shortly and he was expected to calm down. He knew how to pick 'em, too, because this Libby Millman he was engaged to, she not only was a looker, she was loaded. In the daytime she drove around in a yellow Lincoln convertible. Her other Lincoln was a black sedan. She used it nights only.

The rest of Larrabie's chicks? The friend smiled. There'd be some broken hearts, but Larrabie had given his friend a list of names. Would Mr. Wenzel like to try one of them tonight?

Wenzel hedged, but he continued to show interest in the list. Someone by the name of Gorman. Judith Gorman. Did the friend know anything about her? No, he didn't. Never even heard of her.

The following morning the M.E.'s report came in and stated that Judith Gorman had been four months pregnant. The sergeant, reading the findings, smiled, and

he kept on backtracking on Larrabie and consolidating the case against him. He found out that Larrabie had often been in Chicago on business. Since plaid caps are not sold in large quantities and since the label in the cap was that of an exclusive men's shop, Wenzel sent a detective to Chicago to identify the cap and bring back samples of gray herringbone suiting.

Wenzel was lucky. The store kept a list of customers and of their purchases, so that they could duplicate any order at any time. One Cyrus Larrabie had bought a plaid cap from them three years ago. He had also bought a gray herringbone sports jacket. A swatch of the material was available, and it checked exactly with the piece found in the car.

Meanwhile the sergeant interviewed most of the guests who had been at the Wallensack party the other night. The upshot was precisely what he'd hoped for. At a party of thirty people nobody could possibly prove he'd been in the house every single minute. To slip out for a half hour or so without being seen—it would have been easy.

The composite account that the sergeant built up showed that Larrabie had had a few drinks, but was far from drunk. He'd flirted with a couple of girls and he'd got one of them as far as the porch, when the puli had ap-

peared. Larrabie was frightened of dogs, and he made some remark about bitches butting in, and went back into the house.

"I was pretty mad," the girl said. "Such a gentle dog, such fine lovely hair."

The sergeant felt pleased with himself. He swore out a search warrant and waited for Larrabie to come home. Shortly after he did he was brought to the sergeant's office.

Wenzel's first question was a model of sophisticated interrogation. The question did not divulge any information, gave the suspect no indication of why he was being questioned, but nevertheless pinned him down to a position from which there was no retreat.

"Do you or did you," the sergeant said, "at any time know one Judith Gorman?"

The answer was prompt and unequivocal. "No."

"You claim you never saw her?"

"Never even heard of her until I read about her in the paper."

"Good." The sergeant positively beamed. His difficulty lay in placing Larrabie at the scene of the crime at or about the time it had been committed. By asking the lesser question the sergeant had set a clever trap. Larrabie's denial that he knew Judith could be proved a lie, on the basis of the victim's address book, and from that moment on

Larrabie was doomed.

To give him his due, however, Larrabie was consistent and he made no damaging admissions. He denied everything right down the line, except to owning a gray herringbone sports jacket.

"Yes, I have such a jacket," he said, "but I haven't worn it in months."

"I think that you wore it on a certain night, and that there is now a tear in it."

"If there is I know nothing about it."

"You killed Judith Gorman," the sergeant said coldly, "and I can prove it."

"You're crazy," Larrabie said, but there was more than a hint of fear in his voice.

"I ask your consent for a sample of your blood and for some hairs that the laboratory needs for comparison purposes."

Larrabie ran his hand through his hair, pulled, and came out with a few strands. "Here," he said shakily. "Take my blood next, and then let's end this nightmare."

A gray herringbone jacket with a small tear was found in Larrabie's closet. The fibers found in the car matched the fibers in the jacket. Larrabie's hair ends matched some of the hairs found in the car, his blood was type AB, subgroup m, RH negative, and he admitted having attended the Miami convention when the

souvenir lighters were given out.

The D.A. congratulated Wenzel on the thoroughness with which he'd gathered the evidence.

"I wish there were more police officers like you," the D.A. said. "With evidence like this I can't help but get a conviction."

"Thanks," the sergeant said, "but my investigation was nothing out of the ordinary. It was logical and thorough, but that's what I'm paid for."

At the trial the D.A. presented the overload of evidence that Wenzel had gathered, and Wenzel took the stand and made his usual good impression. Cross-questioning merely substantiated his statements. Nevertheless the jury brought in a verdict of Not Guilty.

The judge was shocked. He polled the jury, and each of them stood up and said firmly, "I find the defendant Not Guilty."

The judge gave them a tongue lashing, said it was the worst verdict he'd ever heard in his courtroom, and dismissed them without thanks. But privately he tried to find out what had gone wrong.

The jurors refused to talk either to him or to reporters. The D.A. was as mystified as the judge. The defense attorney suggested, the merest innuendo, that he knew the reason, but everyone said he was simply trying to take credit for winning the case.

Sergeant Wenzel was more dissatisfied than anyone else. He not only had an innate need for correct answers, but this was his case and an acquittal was almost a personal insult. He therefore determined to force someone to tell him what had gone on in the jury room.

After due study of the names of the jurors and their backgrounds he fastened on one George Miles. Miles owned a restaurant, and since no restaurant can conform completely to all the laws and ordinances covering its operation, the sergeant dined there and made a few discreet inquiries. He found what he wanted, then armed with a list of violations he visited Miles. The proprietor saw the point and answered the sergeant's questions freely.

"The reason we refused to talk," Miles said, "was that the judge instructed us not to use any special knowledge of our own, that it would be unethical, but to decide the case only on evidence presented in court. And—well, you see, I know pulis. They're my hobby."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I breed them. I tell you, I know pulis."

"What about them?"

"The puli is a Hungarian sheepdog, bred as a herder, to keep sheep together in the flock, but the instinct is so deep that he'll herd anything including

people. If I go walking with some of my friends and one of them becomes separated or even lags behind, my pulis go after him. Those dogs of mine will nudge and push and nip and snarl, and bring that person right back to the group. And a puli is a pretty big dog."

"I still don't get it," the sergeant said.

"Larrabie took a girl out to the porch, and the Wallensack puli forced him back inside—remember that bit of evidence? And Larrabie was afraid of dogs, so he couldn't have left the party. Impossible. The puli wouldn't let him.

"The first vote we took was eleven to one for conviction. I dissented. Believe me, it took a lot of arguing, but in the end nobody wanted to convict Larrabie of murder if that puli would have kept him from leaving the house. The other jurors finally agreed." Miles licked his lips. "Sergeant, you got the wrong man."

Wenzel was furious. He not only had his record to think of, but if any of the jurors spoke up publicly, if it was ever discovered that Sergeant Wenzel had pulled the most colossal boner of his career—accusing an innocent man—he'd be through. He wouldn't be demoted, not after his commanding officer had okayed the case and backed him,

but the sergeant's pride and self-confidence and reputation for infallibility would be gone. All the people on whose toes he'd stepped, and he'd stepped on plenty, would laugh at him. And he'd have to take it.

The sergeant wrestled with the problem of what to do, and he came to a decision. As a result of it he called on Larrabie and questioned him at some length. Afterward the sergeant had a session with Colonel Ide, his commanding officer. The sergeant told of his interview with Miles.

"I would like," Wenzel said, "permission to reopen the case."

"Any new leads?" Colonel Ide asked.

"I think so. I saw Larrabie and he said that about fifteen years ago he and a man named Eddie Cannon were roommates and close friends. Cannon was engaged to a girl named Harriet Mann, and the threesome saw a lot of each other. Harriet kissed the pair of them good night after every date, and Larrabie was scheduled to be best man at the wedding. But the wedding never took place, because Larrabie ran off with the bride-to-be."

"What did Cannon do?"

"Nothing. Larrabie and Harriet moved out to the coast, where they lived together, but without getting married. Eventually, Larrabie says, he saw that they weren't made for each other and

he left her. Three months later, in despair at being pregnant and friendless and deserted, she committed suicide, although Larrabie claims he had no news of it until much later.

"He and Cannon met at a party about ten years ago, which was five years after the suicide. Larrabie says he explained that he and Harriet had parted by mutual consent and that he'd had no idea at the time that she was pregnant. He says that, after his account, he and Cannon made up, but I have my doubts as to how sincere this Eddie Cannon could have been. I'd like to investigate him." The sergeant's eyes gleamed. "I want to nail him for this."

"You think he framed Larrabie for the Judith Gorman murder?"

"Somebody did," Wenzel said.

"You think Cannon killed a perfectly innocent girl, with no motive except to frame Larrabie?"

"It's possible, although maybe Cannon got her pregnant and wanted to get rid of her for that reason. I don't know, and I'd like to clear up the case."

"Somebody framed Larrabie," Colonel Ide said. "If Cannon did it you'll have to show how he planted Larrabie's lighter in Judith's room. You'll have to prove Cannon stole, or could have stolen, that cap, ripped a piece of cloth from the gray jacket, gotten hold of an untraceable gun, obtained hair samples and a blood

sample, and, finally, left no trace of himself among Judith's possessions. That's a tall order, Sergeant."

"A friend could do most of it," Wenzel remarked.

Colonel Ide leaned back in his chair. "Go ahead," he said. "Somebody killed her, and we've got to find out who."

The sergeant was lucky. The first thing he discovered was that Eddie Cannon worked as a private detective for the Harlan Bancroft Investigative Agency. And a private detective has connections—the kind, for instance, that can procure him an untraceable gun. And a private detective could have the know-how to transfer a blood sample. And he could break into an apartment and take a cap and a scrap of jacket and a cigarette lighter and a few hair ends. Or even better, with a little resourcefulness, he could obtain those particular items while visiting a friend.

So—the cap, the jacket, the lighter. By itself, Eddie Cannon's occupation went a long way toward showing that he had the expertise to frame Larrabie. And then the sergeant found out that Larrabie had paid his friend Cannon \$500 to investigate Judith Gorman's death, for the purpose of proving Larrabie's innocence.

The sergeant sensed that he had something important, but he did not go to Cannon directly. No

yet. Instead he called the Bancroft agency. He had no trouble getting the information that Cannon had asked for and had received a leave of absence in order to work for a friend. The day after getting the leave, Cannon had flown to Hawaii, where he'd stayed for six weeks.

The sergeant went to Hawaii. Investigation revealed that Cannon had registered at a good hotel, made love to two girls, learned how to surf, and gained ten pounds. Then Cannon returned. He arrived home shortly before the trial and had not spoken to Larrabee since.

The sergeant's next step was to locate witnesses who had seen Eddie Cannon and Judith Gorman together. For that he covered selected drive-ins, bars, restaurants, and motels, where he showed Judith's picture along with Cannon's. He explained who they were and asked, "You saw them together here, didn't you?"

Witnesses like that are easy to get. They say yes because they want the notoriety of having seen the defendant. They know that a little publicity will bring in business to a bar or a restaurant. The sergeant had no illusions about their motives, and he did not vouch for their accuracy. He merely knew that juries are impressed by people who get up on the stand and say unhesitatingly, "Yes, I saw them together." If

the D.A. wanted to use this type of witness, that was up to him.

Still, Wenzel was making progress and he felt he was getting close to building up a solid case. He had motive and opportunity, and the Cannon-Gorman connection was established. All that remained was to place Cannon on the scene of the crime.

He now saw Cannon for the first time. The sergeant approached him in a friendly manner and made no accusations. He managed, however, to slip in the question as to where Cannon had been on the night of the murder.

"Working," Cannon said, "on a confidential case."

Wenzel didn't push it, but the next day he went to see Bancroft with the same question. "What was Eddie Cannon doing on the night that Judith Gorman was killed?" he asked.

Bancroft, resenting the question, insisting that Cannon's work was privileged and private, told the sergeant to get out and stay out. Back at headquarters, the sergeant took up the matter with Colonel Ide.

"Nobody," the sergeant said, "can kick a State Trooper out of his office and get away with it. I'll get the information all right, but I want an apology, too."

"I'll have Bancroft here," Colonel Ide promised, "at ten o'clock tomorrow morning."

"With his file on Eddie Can-

non," the sergeant said.

Colonel Ide nodded. "He'll bring it. I want a showdown on this case."

The interview was not pleasant for anyone, and they all knew it. Bancroft led off.

"Sergeant," he said, "you're making a serious accusation. I know my men, I make exhaustive inquiries before I hire them, and they're not criminals. If you have any evidence let's hear it."

"Good," the sergeant said, and he gave it. It was detailed, lengthy, and impressive, and Bancroft listened attentively.

"You've made a fairly convincing case," he said, after the sergeant had finished, "to show that Larrabie was framed and that a professional probably did it, but you haven't proved that Eddie Cannon was the one."

"Who else?" Wenzel said.

Bancroft spoke sharply. "You," he said. "Ever since you started investigating Eddie Cannon, *he's* been investigating *you*. And he found out some interesting things.

"First of all he traced the gun, which we know was part of that stolen Oregon shipment. You were on the five-man detail that eventually recovered those guns, but you didn't hand all of them in. Each one of you appropriated one for himself, and Eddie has written statements by the other four to that effect.

"Next, you brought Larrabie

home from that car accident of his, where he was cut up a little. He told Cannon that he'd mentioned the Wallensack party to you, and that was probably when you got the idea of framing him. Simple to carry out, wasn't it? Larrabie was shaken up and bleeding, nothing easier than getting hold of a blood sample of his and then walking out of his place with his cigarette lighter, his cap, and bit of material torn from his jacket. And, like any hat or cap, a few hair ends were caught in the lining.

"On the night of the murder you parked among the other cars at the Wallensacks' and then you walked down to your meeting with Judith and shot her. After she was dead you planted your clues. If there was any evidence of your affair with her, you had ample opportunity to destroy it when you went to her house the next morning, supposedly to investigate. And that was when you wrote Larrabie's name in her address book, and that can be proved, too. You know enough about handwriting and inks to realize that."

"A bunch of theories," the sergeant said coldly. "And the first thing Cannon had better explain is why he accepted five hundred dollars to clear Larrabie, and then went to Hawaii and did nothing. Nothing at all."

"On the contrary," Bancroft

said. "Eddie Cannon earned his fee. Among other things he told Larrabee's lawyer all about pulis, and when Larrabee was lucky enough to find a juror who was a breeder of pulis and therefore knew all about them, that was a lot better than putting an expert

on the stand where he'd be cross-questioned at length. Maybe it wasn't too ethical on the lawyer's part, but—"

Bancroft shrugged, and Colonel Ide, grim and scowling, finished the remark. "Effective," he said. "Damned effective."



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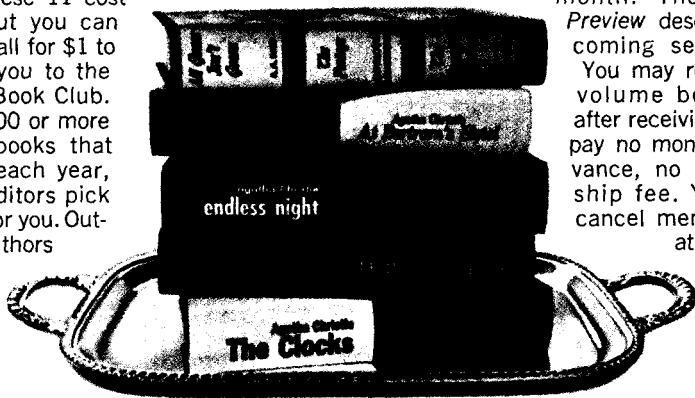
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